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Ali Abdaal

Feel Good Productivity

How to Do More of What Matters to You

"A much-needed antidote to hustle culture."

—Mark Manson, author of *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*

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Feel-Good Productivity

How to Do More of What Matters to You

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To Mimi and Nani – for all your love, support and sacrifices.

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INTRODUCTION

‘Merry Christmas, Ali. Try not to kill anyone.’

With these words, my consultant breezily hung up the phone, leaving me to handle an entire ward of patients alone. I was a newly qualified junior doctor, and three weeks previously I’d made a rookie error: forgetting to fill out a form to request the holidays off. Now, here I was, managing a hospital ward, on my own, on Christmas Day.

Things had started badly and rapidly got worse. When I arrived at the hospital, I was met by an avalanche of patient histories, diagnostic reports and cryptic scan requests that would’ve made more sense to a seasoned archaeologist than our on-call radiologist**.** Within minutes, I was confronted by the day’s first emergency: a man in his fifties who had collapsed from a severe cardiac arrest**.** And then one of the nurses informed me that a patient urgently needed a manual evacuation (if you know, you know).

At 10:30am**,** I looked around the ward. Nurse Janice was sprinting up and down corridor A in a panic, her arms overflowing with IV drips and medication charts**.** On corridor B, a stubborn elderly patient was loudly demanding his misplaced dentures. Corridor C had been taken over by a drunken exile from the emergency department, wandering the corridor and shouting ‘Olive! Olive!’ (I never learned who Olive was.) And every minute, somebody was making a new demand: ‘Dr Ali, can you check on Mrs Johnson’s fever?’ ‘Dr Ali, can you help with Mr Singh’s elevated potassium?’

I soon found myself starting to panic. Medical school hadn’t prepared me for anything like this. Until then, I’d always been quite an effective student. Whenever the going got tough, my strategy was simple: work harder. It was a method that had got me into medical school seven years previously. It had allowed me to secure a handful of publications in academic journals. It had even allowed me to launch a business while I studied. Discipline was the only productivity system I knew. And it worked.

Except now it wasn't working. Since starting as a doctor a few months previously I'd felt like I was drowning. Even when I worked late into the night, I couldn't see the number of patients or finish the paperwork that I needed to. My mood was suffering, too; I'd enjoyed my medical training to be a doctor, but I was finding the actual job utterly depressing, constantly worrying that I might make a mistake that would kill someone. I stopped sleeping, friendships faded, my family stopped hearing from me. And I just kept working harder.

And now this. Christmas Day, alone on a hospital ward, failing to get through my shift.

Everything came to a head when I dropped a tray of medical supplies, sending syringes flying across the linoleum floor. As I forlornly looked down at my damp scrubs, I realised I had to figure things out – or my dream of becoming a surgeon would slip through my fingers.

That night, I hung up my stethoscope, grabbed a mince pie, and opened my laptop. I'd once been so productive, I thought. What had I forgotten? During my first year at medical school, I'd become obsessed with the secrets of productivity. I'd stayed up night after night making notes on hundreds of articles, blog posts and videos promising the key to optimal performance. All the gurus emphasised the importance of hard slog. A Muhammad Ali quote came up a lot: 'I hated every minute of training, but I said, "Don't quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion."'

As Christmas turned to Boxing Day, I stayed up poring over my old notes and wondered whether that was where I was going wrong. Did I just need to regain my old work ethic? But when I returned to work the next day resolving to just *do more*, it made no difference. Even though I stayed on the ward until midnight – and even though I was reciting Muhammad Ali's line to myself during my toilet breaks – I wasn't getting through my paperwork any quicker. My patients were still getting a tired, ineffective version of Ali. And I was still displaying a conspicuous lack of Christmas cheer.

At the end of my hardest day yet, I felt completely underwater. And then from nowhere, I remembered some words of wisdom from my old tutor, Dr Barclay. 'If the treatment isn't working, question the diagnosis.'

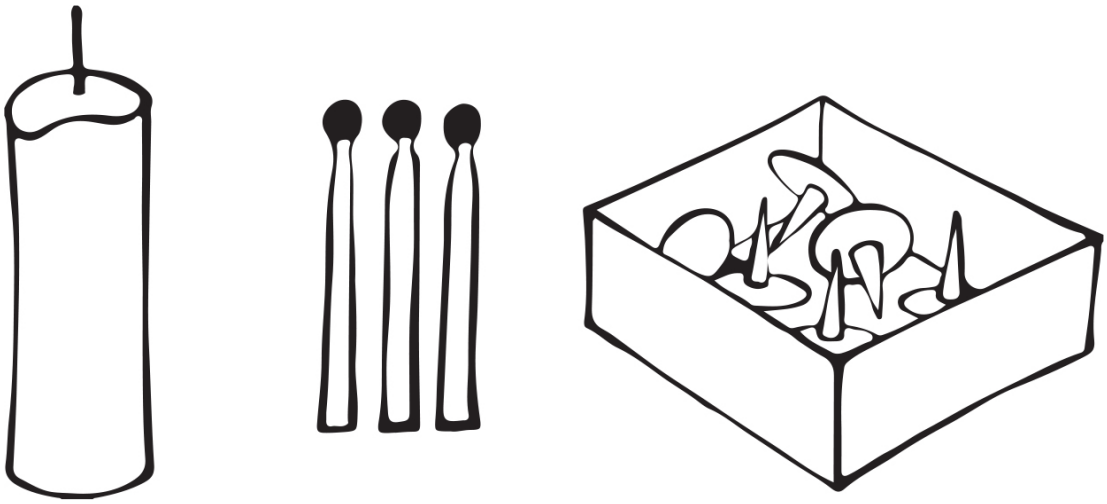
Slowly, and then all at once, I started to doubt all the productivity advice I had absorbed. Did success really require suffering? What was ‘success’ anyway? Was suffering even sustainable? Did it make sense that feeling overwhelmed would be good for getting things done? Did I have to trade my health and happiness for, well, *anything?*

It would take me a few months. But I was stumbling my way to a revelation: that everything I’d been told about success was wrong. I couldn’t hustle my way to becoming a good doctor. Working harder wasn’t going to bring me happiness. And there was another path to fulfilment: one that wasn’t lined with constant anxiety, sleepless nights, and a concerning dependence on caffeine.

I didn’t have all the answers, not by a long shot. But for the first time, I could make out the beginnings of an alternative approach. An approach that didn’t hinge on exhaustingly hard work, but on understanding what made hard work feel better. An approach that focused on my wellbeing first, and used that wellbeing to drive my focus and motivation second. An approach I would come to refer to as feel-good productivity.

THE SURPRISING SECRETS OF FEEL-GOOD PRODUCTIVITY

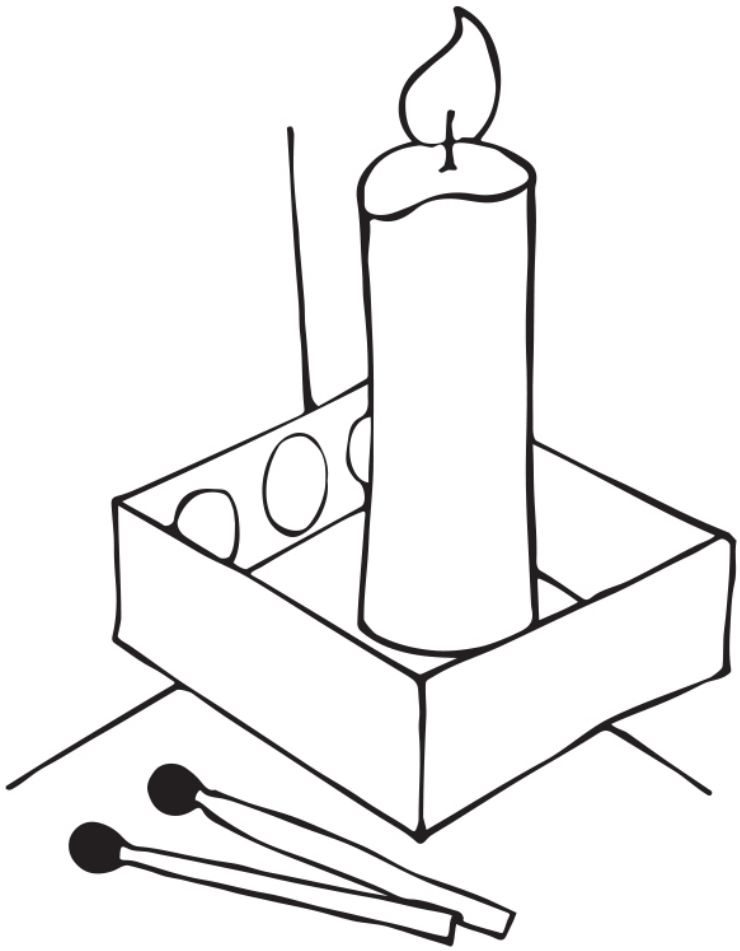
Back in medical school, my obsession with productivity had led me to tack on an extra year to earn a psychology degree. As I started putting together the pieces of feel-good productivity, I remembered a study I’d been tested on – one that involved a candle, a book of matches and a box of thumbtacks.



Picture yourself with these three objects before you. Your task is to stick the candle to the corkboard on the wall so that, when it’s lit, the candle wax won’t drip onto the table below. You find yourself puzzling over the items, turning them over in your hands. Can you think of the solution?

When presented with this problem, most people only consider the candle, the matches and the thumbtacks. But more innovative minds recognise the potential of the thumbtack box. The optimal solution to the puzzle involves viewing the thumbtack box not just as a container, but as a candle holder.

This is the ‘candle problem’, a classic test of creative thinking. First developed by Karl Duncker, and published posthumously in 1945, it has since been used in countless studies testing everything from cognitive flexibility to the psychological fallout of stress. In the late 1970s, psychologist Alice Isen used it as the basis for an influential experiment to study how mood affects people’s creativity.



Isen began by dividing her volunteers into two groups. One group was given a small gift – a bag of candy – before facing the candle problem. The other group started the task with no such incentive. The theory went that those who were given the sweets would have a more positive mood when they tried to solve the puzzle. Isen found something interesting: those whose moods were subtly improved by the gift were significantly more successful in solving the candle problem.

When I first read about Isen's experiment during my psychology degree, I found it interesting but not exactly transformative. Personally, I'd never felt the overwhelming urge to stick a candle to a wall. But coming back to it as a junior doctor, I realised that Isen's insight was quite profound. It suggested that feeling good doesn't just end with feeling good. It actually changes our patterns of thought and behaviour.

I now learned that the study had become the cornerstone of a wave of research exploring the way positive emotions affect many of our cognitive processes. It showed that when we're in a positive mood, we tend to consider a broader range of actions, be more open to new experiences, and better integrate the information we receive. In other words, feeling good boosts our creativity – and our productivity.

One of the first people to explore how exactly this works was Barbara Fredrickson. A professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Fredrickson is one of the leading figures in positive psychology, a relatively new branch of psychology that focuses on understanding and promoting happiness. In the late 1990s, Fredrickson proposed what she called the 'broaden-and-build' theory of positive emotions.

According to the broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions 'broaden' our awareness and 'build' our cognitive and social resources. *Broaden* refers to the immediate effect of positive emotions: when we're feeling good, our minds open up, we take in more information, and we see more possibilities around us. Consider the candle problem: in a positive mood, participants were able to see a broader range of potential solutions.

Build refers to the long-term effects of positive emotions. When we experience positive emotions, we build up a reservoir of mental and emotional resources that can help us in the future – resources like resilience, creativity, problem-solving skills, social connections and physical health. Over time, these two processes reinforce each other, creating an upward spiral of positivity, growth and success.

Positive emotions are the fuel that drives the engine of human flourishing.

The theory suggests a whole new way of understanding the role of positive emotions in our lives. They're not just fleeting feelings that come and go without consequence. They're integral to our cognitive functioning, our social relationships and our overall wellbeing. Positive emotions are the fuel that drives the engine of human flourishing.

WHY FEEL-GOOD PRODUCTIVITY WORKS

When I first started learning about broaden-and-build, I caught a glimpse of a different way of thinking about my life. For years, I'd thought that by simply hustling harder I could achieve the things I wanted. If I wanted to be a good doctor, the life ahead of me would be defined by grinding, unrelenting work.

Now, I could see another way. Fredrickson's theory suggests that positive emotions change the way our brains operate. Step one is feeling better. Step two is doing more of what matters to us.

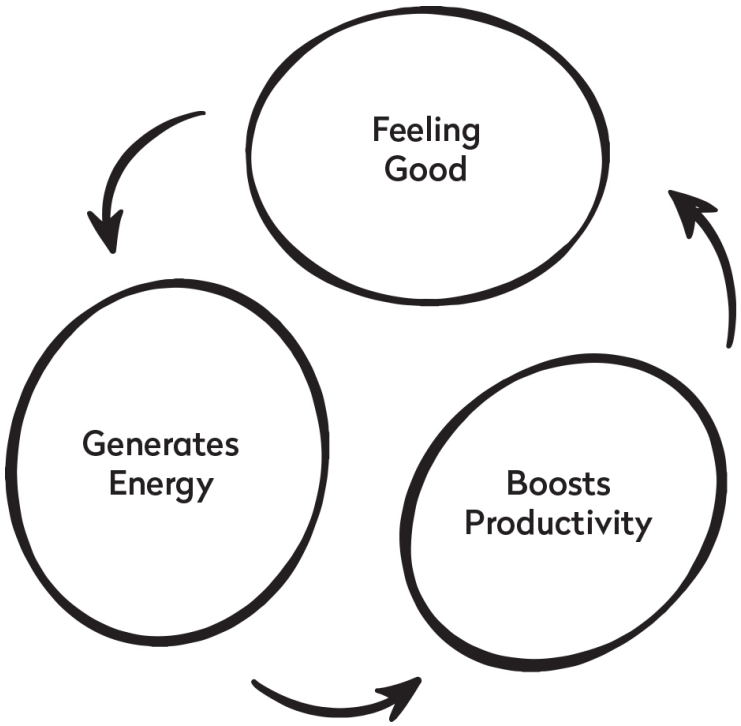
But why? I wondered. The more I read, the more I realised that the explanations are varied – and in some cases remain unclear. But scientists have started to home in on a few answers.

First, **feeling good boosts our energy**. Most of us have felt an energy that's not strictly physical or biological, one that doesn't just come from sugar or carbohydrates, but from a mix of motivation, focus and inspiration. It's the energy you feel when you're working on a particularly engrossing task, or when you're surrounded by inspiring people. This energy has many different names. It's been labelled as 'emotional', 'spiritual', 'mental' or 'motivational' energy by psychologists; 'zest', 'vitality' or 'energetic arousal' by neuroscientists. But if researchers can't agree on what to name it, they're agreed that it makes us focused, inspired and motivated to pursue our goals.

So what's the source of this mysterious energy? The short answer: *feeling good*. Positive emotions are bound up with a set of four hormones – endorphins, serotonin, dopamine and oxytocin – which are often labelled as the 'feel-good hormones'. All of them allow us to accomplish more. Endorphins are often released during physical activity, stress or pain and bring about feelings of happiness and diminished discomfort – and elevated levels usually correlate with increased energy and motivation. Serotonin is connected to mood regulation, sleep, appetite and overall feelings of wellbeing; it underpins our sense of contentment and gives us the energy to tackle tasks efficiently. Dopamine, or the 'reward' hormone, is linked with motivation and pleasure and its release provides a satisfaction that allows us to focus for longer. And oxytocin, known as the 'love' hormone, is

associated with social bonding, trust and relationship-building, which enhances our capacity to connect with others, boosts our mood and, in turn, impacts our productivity.

All this means that these feel-good hormones are the starting point of a virtuous cycle. When we feel good, we generate energy, which boosts our productivity. And this productivity leads to feelings of achievement, which make us feel good all over again.



Second, **feeling good reduces our stress**. In addition to the broaden-and-build theory, Barbara Fredrickson also developed what psychologists call the ‘undoing hypothesis’. Fredrickson and her colleagues were interested in decades of research showing that negative emotions cause the release of stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. This isn’t a problem in the short-term; it’s the mechanism that motivates us to run from danger. But if we experience these negative sensations too often, we become riddled with anxiety, and our physical health suffers. The continuous activation of these hormones can even increase the risk of developing heart disease and high blood pressure. Not ideal.

Fredrickson wondered about the flipside: if negative emotions have these harmful physiological effects, then perhaps positive emotions could reverse them. Might feeling good ‘reset’ the nervous system and put the body into a more relaxed state?

To test this out, Fredrickson came up with a rather mean study. Researchers told a group of people that they had one minute to prepare a public speech that would be filmed and judged by their peers. Knowing that the fear of public speaking is practically universal, Fredrickson hypothesised that this would elevate the subjects’ levels of anxiety and stress. And it did; people reported feeling more anxious, and experienced increases in heart rate and blood pressure. Next, the researchers randomly assigned participants to watch one of four films: two evoking mildly positive emotions, the third neutral ones, and the fourth sad ones. And they then measured how long it took the participants to ‘recover’ from the stress.

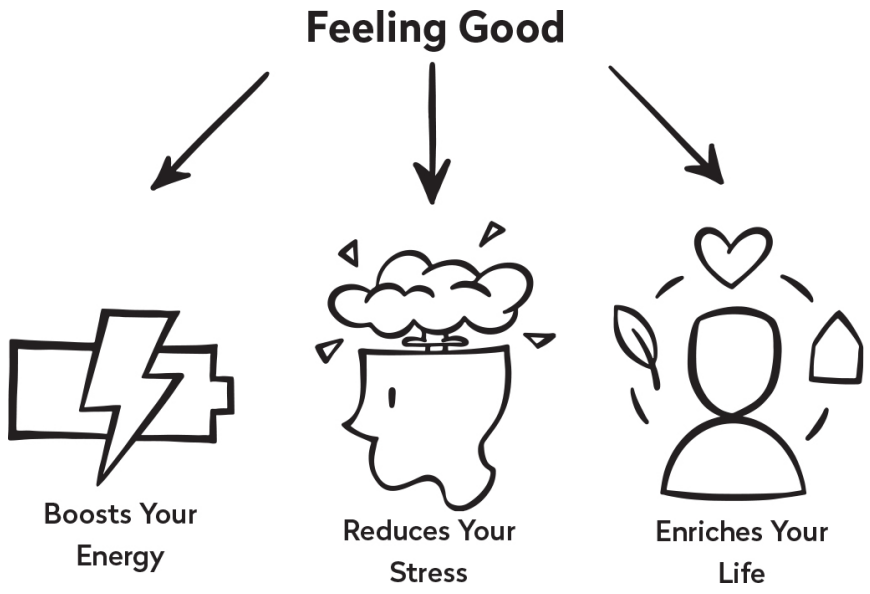
Their findings were intriguing. The participants who watched the positive-emotion films took significantly less time to return to their baseline state in terms of heart rate and blood pressure. And those who watched the sadness-evoking film took the longest time to return to baseline.

This is the ‘undoing hypothesis’: that positive emotions can ‘undo’ the effects of stress and other negative emotions. If stress is the problem, then feeling good might just be the solution.

But the final, and perhaps most transformative, implication of feel-good productivity goes well beyond any one task or project. Because third, **feeling good enriches your life**. In 2005, a team of psychologists read all the studies they could find on the complex relationship between happiness and success. They delved into 225 published papers which involved data from over 275,000 individuals. Their question: Does success, as we’re often told, make us happier – or could it be the other way round?

The study offered hard evidence that we tend to get happiness wrong. Individuals who frequently experience positive emotions aren’t just more sociable, optimistic and creative. They also accomplish more. These people bring an infectious energy to their environment, proving more likely to enjoy fulfilling relationships, get higher salaries and truly shine in their professional lives. Those who cultivate positive emotions at work morph

into better problem-solvers, planners, creative thinkers and resilient go-getters. They're less stressed, attract higher evaluations from their superiors and show a higher degree of loyalty to their organisations.



Success doesn't lead to feeling good. Feeling good leads to success.

Put simply: success doesn't lead to feeling good. Feeling good leads to success.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Back in that first harrowing year as a doctor, most of these discoveries were still years ahead of me. I was working endless shifts and trying to shoehorn my productivity research into the fleeting breaks between visiting patients.

But even the basic insights I uncovered were enough to cause a dramatic change in my relationship with work. When I started to let go of my obsessions with discipline and focus instead on making work feel good, my horrific shifts started to get easier. Soon my mood started to improve too. I remember one appointment with an elderly patient a few months after I discovered feel-good productivity. 'You know, doctor,' she said, 'you're the first one in here who's smiled all week.'

These new perspectives wouldn’t just alter my approach to being a doctor. They would alter the direction of my life altogether. For the first time in years, I began to see the opportunities beyond the confines of work: my friendships, my family and the other passions that I’d sidelined. And I soon found myself wanting to share my discovery. For a few years, I’d been running a YouTube channel on which I posted study tips and technology reviews. Now, I started sharing practical insights I’d learned from psychology and neuroscience, using myself as the guinea pig, experimenting with everything I learned and the strategies I thought might work.

As my radical notion that success doesn’t have to be tied to suffering started to gain traction, I started to get more and more emails from my viewers. High-school students aced their exams, business owners doubled their income, parents managed to balance work and family life better, all by applying the strategies I was sharing. Even seasoned professionals, worn out from the grind of corporate life, were discovering fresh energy, motivation and new direction.

And so was I. The more I read, the more my philosophy developed. Eventually, by following the same principles and strategies I was learning about, I realised that I wanted to take a break from medicine to pursue something new.

That’s when I knew I had to write this book. What’s contained in these pages isn’t just another productivity system to help you get more done at any cost. It’s about doing more of what matters to you. It’ll help you learn more about yourself, what you love and what really motivates you.

My method has three parts, each of which tackles a different aspect of feel-good productivity. Part 1 explains how to use the science of feel-good productivity to energise yourself. It introduces the three ‘energisers’ that underpin positive emotions – play, power and people – and explains how to integrate them into your daily life.

Next, Part 2 examines how feel-good productivity can help us overcome procrastination. You’ll learn about the three ‘blockers’ that make us feel worse – uncertainty, fear and inertia – and how to overcome them. When

you remove these blockers, you won't just overcome procrastination – you'll feel better too.

Finally, in Part 3, we'll explore how feel-good productivity can sustain us in the long term. We'll delve into the three different types of burnout – overexertion burnout, depletion burnout and misalignment burnout. And I'll explain how we can harness three simple 'sustainers' – conserve, recharge and align – to make us feel better not just for days and weeks, but for months and years.

Every chapter contains its fair share of practical tips. But my goal in this book isn't to offer you some sprawling to-do list. It's to offer you a philosophy: a new way of thinking about productivity that you can apply to your own life in your own way. My hope is that you leave this book an amateur 'productivity scientist': finding some methods that work, discarding others, and working savvily to see what helps you feel good and achieve more. That's why every chapter contains not only three simple, science-backed ideas you can use to rethink productivity – but also six 'experiments' that you can implement in your own life. If an experiment works for you, great – if it doesn't, then that too is a helpful insight. By the end of the book, though, you should have a toolkit for applying feel-good productivity to your own work, relationships and life.

I only hope it works as well for you as it has for me. Because if there's one thing I've learned by immersing myself in the science of feel-good productivity, it's that it applies in every sphere. It turns daunting tasks into engaging challenges. It leads to deeper connections with peers. It drives meaningful interactions in what you do, every day.

By understanding and applying what makes you feel good, you won't just transform your work. You'll transform your life.

Feel-good productivity is a simple method. But it changes everything. It shows that if you've ever felt underwater, you don't have to settle for staying afloat. You can learn how to swim.

Let's dive in.

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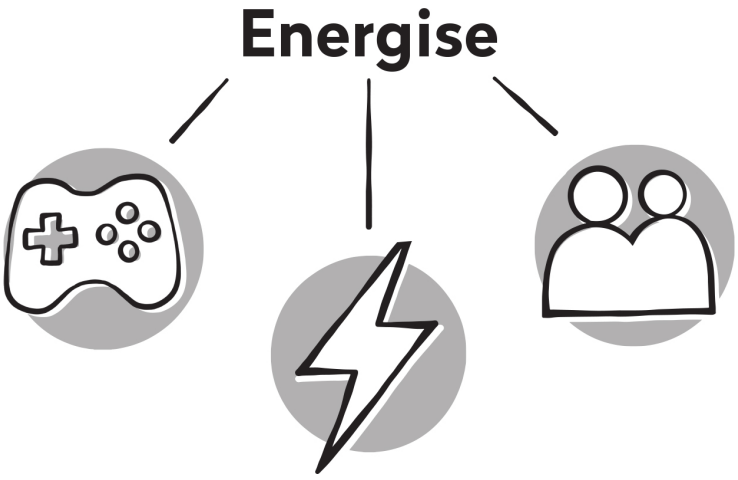
PART 1



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CHAPTER 1

PLAY

On paper, everything about Professor Richard Feynman's career looked perfect. Aged just twenty-seven, he was already being hailed as one of the greatest physicists of his generation – the man most likely to work out how to harness the potential of nuclear energy. Now, he'd been appointed one of the youngest professors at Cornell University in upstate New York.

There was just one problem. He was bored of physics.

The issue had started in the mid-1940s. Every time he sat down to think, he just felt tired. It had begun when Feynman's wife, Arline, died of tuberculosis in June 1945, months before the end of World War Two in America. After her death, all the music in the young professor's life faded away. The ideas that had so animated him as a doctoral student felt dull and flat. Even though he was good at teaching, it felt like a bore and a chore. 'I had simply burned myself out,' he later recalled.

'I'd go over to the library a lot and read through the *Arabian Nights*,' he wrote. 'But when it came time to do some research, I couldn't get to work. I was not interested.'

It was pretty easy doing nothing, he found. He still liked teaching undergraduates, sitting in the library reading and wandering around campus. He just didn't like working. Easy enough. By the late 1940s, Feynman had reconciled himself to a new identity: a physics professor who didn't do any physics.

Until, one day, everything changed. A few years after his problems started, Feynman was sitting in the university cafeteria, alone, opposite a group of students. One of them was repeatedly throwing a plate up in the air. Feynman noticed something odd. While the plate was airborne, it

wobbled. But the Cornell logo inscribed on the plate seemed to wobble faster than the plate itself.

Curious, Feynman thought. But not exactly Nobel Prize-worthy. He was the man who had helped crack the code of nuclear fission; he wasn't supposed to be theorising the characteristics of airborne crockery. But this moment of curiosity sparked a minor epiphany. He began to reflect on what had drawn him to his subject in the first place. 'I used to enjoy doing physics,' he later recollected.

'Why did I enjoy it? I used to play with it. I used to do whatever I felt like doing – it didn't have to do with whether it was important for the development of nuclear physics, but whether it was interesting and amusing for me to play with.'

After leaving the cafeteria, Feynman found himself reminiscing about how he'd seen the world as a teenager. When he was in high school, the things that had most fascinated him about the world had seemed mundane to others. He would see water growing narrower the further it got from the tap and wonder if he could figure out what determined that curve. 'I didn't have to do it; it wasn't important for the future of science; somebody else had already done it,' he said. 'That didn't make any difference: I'd invent things and play with things for my own entertainment.'

What if returning to that worldview held the key to finding joy in physics again? he wondered. Approaching physics not as a job, but as a game to be played for fun? 'I got this new attitude,' he decided. 'Just like I read the *Arabian Nights* for pleasure, I'm going to play with physics, whenever I want to, without worrying about any importance whatsoever.'

It started with that wobbling plate. In the weeks that followed, Feynman spent weeks trying to model the equations that explained how the plate moved through the air. His colleagues, bemused, asked him why. 'There's no importance whatsoever,' Feynman told them blithely. 'I'm just doing it for the fun of it.'

But the more Feynman got into the wobbling plates, the more fascinating they became. Soon, he was pondering whether the wobbling of a rotating plate was anything like the wobbling of electrons in an atom. Or maybe the workings of quantum electrodynamics. 'Before I knew it (it was

a very short time), I was “playing” – working, really – with the same old problem I loved so much.’ Except this time, the ‘work’ of physics didn’t burn him out.

Professor Feynman’s interest in plate-spinning would eventually win him the Nobel Prize in Physics. His model for all that wobbling helped make sense of quantum electrodynamics, a theory that describes how light and tiny particles interact at the quantum level. To visualise them, he said, it’s helpful to imagine rapidly spinning plates.

Feynman was not alone. To my knowledge, at least six Nobel Prize winners attribute their success to play. James Watson and Francis Crick, who discovered the structure of DNA in the 1950s, described the generative process they used to come up with the structure as ‘constructing a set of molecular models and beginning to play’. Alexander Fleming, the scientist who discovered the antibiotic penicillin, once described his job as ‘playing with microbes’. Donna Strickland, the 2018 Nobel laureate in Physics, described her career as ‘getting to play with high-intensity lasers’. Konstantin Novoselov, who shared the 2010 Nobel Prize in Physics for helping discover graphene, put it most simply: ‘If you try to win the Nobel, you won’t,’ he reflected. ‘The way we were working really was quite playful.’

This approach is supported by a growing body of research. Psychologists increasingly believe that play holds the key to true productivity, partly because it provides a sense of psychological relief. As one recent study put it: ‘the psychological function of play is to restore the physically and mentally fatigued individual through participation in activity which is pleasurable and relaxing.’

Life is stressful. Play makes it fun.

Play is our first energiser. Life is stressful. Play makes it fun. If we can integrate the spirit of play into our lives, we’ll feel better – and do more too.

CREATE AN ADVENTURE

Bringing play into our lives is easier said than done, you might say. In adulthood, many of us are all too aware that play doesn't come easy.

When we're kids, our days are filled with a sense of adventure. We explore every inch of the garden, we race through shopping malls, we climb trees, and we swing from branches. We're not striving for goals or trying to boost our resume. We're following our curiosity and enjoying activities without worrying about results.

But as we get older, this spirit of adventure gets slowly squeezed out of us. Unless you had particularly forward-thinking parents, you were probably taught that the first major step towards becoming a grown-up is to stop playing and start taking life seriously. Life goes from being filled with adventure to a mundane, predictable existence.

This is a mistake. Because adventure, it turns out, is the first major ingredient of play – and perhaps of happiness.

In one 2020 experiment from New York University and the University of Miami, scientists attempted to quantify the effects of approaching the world with a sense of adventure. They enlisted over 130 participants and got their consent to track their location using the GPS in their phones. Over the next several months, the researchers sent the participants text messages asking them about their emotions: how happy, excited or relaxed did they feel?

The results were eye-opening. As the GPS data and responses to the text messages rolled in, it became clear that those who had more adventurous experiences – those who took themselves off to a wider and more random assortment of places, whether taking a new route to work or trying a different coffee shop rather than sticking to their regular one – felt happier, more excited and more relaxed. Their conclusion: an adventurous life holds the key to unlocking positive emotions.

So, the first way to harness the potential of play is to integrate adventure into our lives. But how? Well, with the right tools we can still find the excitement we once got from racing though those malls and swinging from those branches. The first step: choosing your character.

EXPERIMENT 1:
Choose Your Character

Confession: I used to be addicted to World of Warcraft.

WoW is an online role-playing game that is famously aimed at total nerds. You start by choosing your character – it could be a Warlock, a Warrior, a Paladin or plenty more – and explore the fantasy world of Azeroth. You team up with other players to fly around the world, slaying demons, upgrading your weapons and having the time of your life.

It's also famous for being highly addictive. In the three years after I discovered the game when I was fourteen, I clocked up 184 days of played time on it. That's 4,416 hours. Three hours a day, or 25 per cent of my waking hours. It was a lot.

Why did I find World of Warcraft so addictive? As a fourteen-year-old, there's nothing more exciting than killing monsters and going on quests (actually, as an adult that still sounds pretty appealing). But if this simple fact explains why the first few hours of gameplay are fun, it probably doesn't explain the next several thousand. To be honest, after a while, the mechanics of the game stop being that entertaining. There are only so many times you can enjoy being sent on a mission to rescue the local villager's cat.

I increasingly suspect it wasn't the basic mechanics of WoW that made it so pleasurable; it was the escapism. WoW offers a vivid, alternative world, one where you can slay an army of zombies with a magic spell or tame a dragon and fly around on its back. And more importantly, it's a world that you enter in character. In WoW I've never been Ali Abdaal, the slightly nerdy schoolkid with zero sporting ability and confidence issues. I've always been Sepharoth, the tall, handsome Blood Elf Warlock with billowing purple robes and an army of demons at my command.

Play allows us to take on different roles or personas, whether we're becoming a character in WoW or acting out an imaginary scene with friends in the playground. These characters allow us to express different aspects of ourselves and transform our experiences into something more enjoyable. When you take on a different persona, you start to find adventure.

This is not as out-there as it sounds. Choosing your 'character' doesn't mean reinventing your personality overnight (nor pretending to be a goblin in front of your colleagues). Rather, it means identifying the type of play

that most resonates with who you are, so you can choose a type of player to embody.

Dr Stuart Brown has spent most of his career studying the psychology of play. A clinical psychologist, he began researching the benefits of play after witnessing its transformative effects on patients. Eventually, he would establish the National Institute for Play and became a clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego. During this time, he spoke to over 5,000 people from all walks of life – ranging from artists to truck drivers to Nobel laureates – about what play meant to them.

In the course of these interviews, he discovered that most of us are prone to just one or two particular types of character-play. By finding the ones that resonate with us the most, we can start to take on a ‘play personality’ that frees up our sense of adventure. These are the eight ‘play personalities’ that Dr Brown distilled through his research.

The 8 Play Personalities

1. **The Collector** loves to gather and organise, enjoying activities like searching for rare plants, or rummaging around in archives or garage sales.
2. **The Competitor** enjoys games and sports, and takes pleasure in trying their best and winning.

3. **The Explorer** likes to wander, discovering new places and things they've never seen, through hiking, road tripping and other adventures.
4. **The Creator** finds joy in making things, and can spend hours every day drawing, painting, making music, gardening and more.
5. **The Storyteller** has an active imagination and uses their imagination to entertain others. They're drawn to activities like writing, dance, theatre and role-playing games.
6. **The Joker** endeavours to make people laugh, and may play by performing stand-up, doing improv, or just pulling a lot of pranks to make you smile.
7. **The Director** likes to plan, organise and lead others, and can fit into many different roles and activities, from directing stage performances to running a company, to working in political or social advocacy.
8. **The Kinesthete** finds play in physical activities like acrobatics, gymnastics and free running.

Here lies the first step to approaching your work – and your life – with a sense of playful adventure. Reflect on which of these characters you identify with most, and try to approach your work as if you are that character. If you're 'the Storyteller', that might entail seeking out ways to turn a boring task (writing a dry, logistical email) into one that draws on your sense of playfulness (finding a way to turn it into a story, with a beginning, middle and end, and maybe an unexpected twist). Or if you're 'the Creator', it might mean transforming mundane tasks (filling in that dull spreadsheet) into opportunities for self-expression (turning it into a visually appealing and easy-to-understand infographic).

Identifying and exploring our play personalities helps us reclaim some of the adventure that defined our childhoods – a time when feeling good was the norm, not the exception. It's a spirit that still lies within us. As Stuart Brown says: 'Remembering what play is all about and making it part of our daily lives are probably the most important factors in being a fulfilled human being.'

EXPERIMENT 2:

Embrace Your Curiosity

What does the term ‘dinosaur’ actually mean?

What Beatles song stayed in the US singles chart for the longest?

Who was the president of the United States when Uncle Sam first got his beard?

These are not just questions from a particularly fiendish pub quiz. They’re three of the nineteen prompts used by researchers at the University of California Davis Center for Neuroscience in a pioneering experiment. After asking a group of twenty-four volunteers these questions, they asked each of them to rate how much they cared about the answers to each question, from ‘low-curiosity’ to ‘high-curiosity’. And then they let the questions simmer in the minds of the participants for a while. (The answers, by the way, are ‘terrible lizard’, ‘Hey Jude’ and Abraham Lincoln.)

The researchers were trying to investigate what effect curiosity had on people’s minds. For one thing, the researchers had a hunch that when people were curious about something, they remembered the details better. They were right. The study showed that people were a whopping 30 per cent more likely to recall a fact they found interesting, rather than a fact they found boring.

But what was perhaps more surprising was what was going on in people’s brains at the point that they recalled these facts. When they were given a brain scan, their neurological activity was quite different when they were asked a question they were curious about: they seemed to receive a hit of dopamine. Dopamine is one of our feel-good hormones, and it also activates the part of the brain responsible for learning and forming memories. So for the study participants, engaging with their curiosity made them feel good – and they in turn became better at retaining information.

Harnessing your curiosity is a second method for building adventure into your life. Curiosity doesn’t simply make our lives more enjoyable. It also allows us to focus longer. After painstakingly researching the biographies of some of history’s most pioneering minds, from Leonardo da Vinci to Steve Jobs, the writer Walter Isaacson summarised his findings

thus: ‘Being curious about everything not only makes you more creative. It enriches your life.’

Curiosity doesn’t simply make our lives more enjoyable. It also allows us to focus longer.

How then do we integrate a sense of curiosity into our lives? One method is to seek out what I call ‘side quests’. In video games like Zelda, The Witcher, and Elden Ring, there are dozens of side quests waiting to be pursued. These side quests don’t affect the main story of the game, but are driven by the curiosity of the player: what happens if I enter this cave, or try to get to the highest point in this area, or swim to the bottom of this lake? Many of the game’s best secrets may be hidden in caves, forests and villages that a player following the basic storyline wouldn’t otherwise come across.

I often think of my life as containing a series of side quests. Every day as I sit down to work, I look at my calendar and to-do list, and I ask myself: ‘What’s today’s side quest going to be?’ This question helps me shift my mindset from the obvious tasks that lie ahead to the potential alternative avenues they might take me down. It might prompt me to leave my office and spend a few hours working in a local coffee shop. Or it might encourage me to explore new software I could use to solve the problem I’m working on.

By adding a side quest to your day, you create space for curiosity, exploration and playfulness – and could discover something amazing and totally unexpected along the way.

FIND THE FUN

It was a star-lit evening in the late 1990s at a small university in Ohio. A young graduate research assistant stood in the lab, holding a rat in his palm. He delicately stroked the rat’s white belly with a dry paintbrush, hoping that something interesting would happen.

At first, nothing. But then, suddenly, the rat cried out. Except not in distress; if anything, the rat seemed to be laughing.

These scientists weren’t tickling rats for the fun of it. In fact, they were investigating the biological effects of play on the human brain – what lead scientist Jaak Panksepp called ‘the biology of joy’. At the time, the prevailing belief in the scientific community was that only humans experienced emotions. It was thought that emotions stem from the highly complex part of the brain that is unique to us, the cerebral cortex. But Panksepp’s discovery that rodents could laugh suggested an alternative: that emotions must come from much more primitive areas of the brain, like the amygdala and hypothalamus. Joy, Panksepp showed, is a deeply primal experience.

One of Panksepp’s key findings was that rats love to play. He spent much of his experiment recording the sounds made by rats when they were playing. The noises were joyful, he later said: ‘It sounded like a playground.’ The reason? Play releases dopamine. It made the rats feel good.

We can learn a thing or two from those rodents. Panksepp’s rats showed that if we want to find joy in what we’re doing, it won’t be solely down to the higher and most complicated parts of the brain, those associated with the cerebral cortex. It’s also down to the more ancient, basic parts of our neurology – the same feel-good hormones activated in those rats. We too can release little dopamine hits that keep us happy and engaged.

But how? The answer can be found by studying what specifically elicits dopamine. As one article published by Harvard Medical School puts it, the hormone is activated by ‘sex, shopping, [and] smelling cookies baking in the oven’ – in other words, by the activities we find fun.

So if we want to harness the revolutionary effects of play, our second step is to seek out fun everywhere we go. And that starts by paying a visit to a Disneyfied version of Edwardian London.

EXPERIMENT 3:
The Magic Post-It Note

During a particularly exhausting phase working as a junior doctor, my housemate Molly and I decided to revisit a childhood favourite: *Mary Poppins*. We hoped that immersing ourselves in a world of animated birds,

extremely bad cockney accents and musical hits about Suffragism would provide some relief, even if only for a couple of hours.

At the time, I was struggling to find motivation to study for my postgraduate medical exams. When combined with my hospital work, the looming deadlines and complex material felt overwhelming. The idea of sitting down to read textbooks at the end of my shift felt nightmarish.

But as I rewatched *Mary Poppins*, something unexpected happened. The movie wasn't just a frivolous tale of a quirky nanny with magical powers – it held a profound truth. One of the film's most famous songs is 'A Spoonful of Sugar', which Mary sings to the children when they're complaining about chores. I didn't remember many of the lyrics from my childhood, other than the chorus: 'A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down … in the most delightful way.'

Watching this familiar yet forgotten scene twenty-something years later, I heard how the song begins.

In every job that must be done,
There is an element of fun.
You find the fun and snap!
The job's a game.

The rest of the song describes various ways in which larks, robins and honeybees make their tedious tasks more enjoyable by singing while they work. (Robins apparently sing their 'merry tune' in order to 'move the job along'; an analysis I was subsequently sad to learn is not ornithologically accurate.)

I decided to apply this idea to my own life. In a late-night burst of inspiration, I grabbed a Sharpie and a Post-it note and wrote nine simple words: *What would this look like if it were fun?*

I stuck the note to my computer monitor and went to sleep.

By the time I spotted the note on my monitor the following day, I'd forgotten that I'd put it there. I'd just got back from work and was making a start on re-learning some biochemistry pathways for my medical exam. I sat down with my usual grin-and-bear-it expression. But when I saw the Post-it it got me thinking. What *would* this look like if it were fun?

The first answer came to me immediately: if this were fun, there would be music. I realised that memorising tedious biochemistry pathways magically became a lot more interesting with the *Lord of the Rings* soundtrack playing through my headphones. Suddenly, music became one of the most important ways for me to bring more playfulness into my work.

I also began to apply this method at work. At the time I was on my Geriatric Medicine placement, where the doctors' office was a small, scantly decorated room in the corner of the ward. On one particularly gruelling afternoon, when I was sitting in the office with an enormous list of tasks before me, I decided to apply the 'musical fun' method. I didn't have any speakers with me, so I grabbed a bowl from the kitchen and put my phone in there to use as a makeshift speaker. I opened up Spotify and spent the rest of the day doing my tasks with the *Pirates of the Caribbean* soundtrack playing at a low volume. The effects were transformative; it just felt better.

'What would this look like if it were fun?' has now become a guiding question in my life. And it's surprisingly easy to draw upon. Think of a task that you don't want to do right now, and ask what would it look like if it were fun? Could you do it in a different way? Could you add music, or a sense of humour, or get creative? What if you set out to do the task with friends, or promised yourself a treat at the end of the process?

Is there a way to make this draining process a little more enjoyable?

EXPERIMENT 4:
Enjoy the Process, Not the Outcome

There's another way to find fun in everything you're doing, and it doesn't even involve rewatching children's films from the mid-twentieth century. In fact, it's best demonstrated by a 5ft 7in Spanish teenager with bleached blond hair.

In August 2021, Alberto Ginés López stepped onto the podium as the inaugural gold-medal winner in sport climbing at the Summer Olympics in Tokyo. Over the preceding weeks, the world had watched, transfixed, as he completed a series of astonishing physical feats on the multicoloured walls of Tokyo's Aomi Urban Sports Park. Most impressive of all was the speed

climbing – where you clamber up a wall as fast as possible, spider-style. Lopez reached the top of the wall in a dazzling 6.42 seconds.

But as the crowds watched Lopez and his fellow climbers scramble up the walls at dizzying speeds, they also noticed that this was quite an unusual sport. It wasn't just that the competitors tended to look rather more bohemian than your regular track-and-field athletes, with locks of colourfully dyed hair and brightly coloured harnesses. They also seemed to be more relaxed. Rather than avoiding eye contact and watching tensely as their competitors took to the walls, many of the climbers seemed to be chatting jovially at the bottom, and even sharing tips. When they did take to the walls, their faces displayed none of the agonised intensity that most sprinters or even footballers tend to exhibit. In fact, they seemed to be positively enjoying themselves.

Those climbers hint at our second way to find the fun: by emphasising the joy that comes not from the outcome, but the process itself.

According to the Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced 'chick-sent-me-hi'), the biggest difference between climbing and, say, football, is that most climbers are completely immersed in the process (climbing the wall) rather than the end result (winning the game). The pioneer of the study of 'flow' – that state in which we're so immersed in a task that the rest of the world seems to melt away – Csikszentmihalyi first developed his theories while watching climbers in the Alps as a teenager. Csikszentmihalyi argued that if we can we learn to focus on the process, rather than the outcome, we're substantially more likely to enjoy a task.

But how? It might be easy enough for rock-climbing, which is inherently fun (to some, anyway). But what if you find yourself in altogether more mundane, or even unpleasant, situations?

Arguably, this is where the power of focusing on the process becomes even *more* powerful. Because with a little creative thinking, you can find joy in any process, however mundane it might seem.

Take the story of Matthew Dicks, today a world-champion storyteller and bestselling novelist. Years before he published his first book, Dicks worked in McDonald's. And he hated it. 'The days felt endless,' Matt once

told me. ‘It was the same routine over and over again. Taking orders, flipping burgers and handing out fries. There was no excitement, no spark, no challenge.’

And so Dicks decided to see if there was any joy to be had, not in the job’s outcome (his infuriatingly meagre pay cheque), but in the process instead. He landed on a classic tactic: upselling. ‘Some days I’d decide it was BBQ Sauce Day,’ he recalls. ‘So for the rest of the day, I’d add a mini sales pitch to each order I took. The customer would order a Big Mac and fries, and I’d ask them if they’d like any sauce with that. If they said no, I’d smile and say, “Well, I’d really recommend the BBQ sauce – there’s nothing that beats that.” Usually at this point, they were a little taken aback, and they’d say, “Ok then, I’ll take the sauce.” If they still didn’t bite, I’d say, “That’s ok, but you’re really missing out. My last customer was reluctant but when she tried the sauce she knew she’d made the right decision.”’

Dicks says that the effects of these little changes in his routine were unexpectedly significant. They were the kind of mini tasks that might, in his words: ‘just make the customer’s day a little better, and definitely made me feel more energised on days that felt like they were dragging’. And they worked. Dicks found himself looking forward to his shifts, eager to see how many people he could convince to try the BBQ sauce.

The process was not inherently enjoyable. But Dicks had created a way to enjoy it. And in doing so, he had found the fun in an uninspiring situation.

LOWER THE STAKES

If adventure and fun promote our ability to play, there’s a related, similarly potent factor that reduces that ability – stress. To understand how, let’s turn once again to this chapter’s most unfortunate experimental subjects: white rats.

Alas, these rats were in for a less enjoyable afternoon than their brush-tickled counterparts that we met earlier. On this occasion, scientists from Columbia University took a group of rats at various different stages of

development and placed a mesh on top of each one so that it was restrained and couldn't move freely. Then they left them there for thirty minutes.

Unsurprisingly, this proved pretty stressful. Before being restrained by the mesh, the rats were messing around with each other, play-fighting and touching each other's napes. But after the mesh was released, the researchers found that the rats' play behaviour completely disappeared. Instead, the rats stayed huddled in groups not playing at all. (Thankfully, the play behaviour returned to baseline levels an hour after this stressful restraining experience.)

Studies on humans, though blessedly less nasty than the ones on animals, have found similar results. Children are more likely to play when they're in a comfortable, non-threatening environment. And studies of adults in the workplace have found that the feeling of relaxation promotes playful behaviours, as well as promoting creativity and wellbeing.

These studies, and countless others, prove something that most of us instinctively know to be true: when we're stressed, we're less likely to be playful. And our creativity, productivity and wellbeing tend to suffer too.

All this hints at our final ingredient of play. For play to flourish, we don't just need to seek out adventure and find fun. We also need to try and create an environment that's low-stakes and that fosters relaxation. And we can start to do that by reappraising how we think about failure.

EXPERIMENT 5:
Reframe Your Failure

In 2016, a NASA-trained engineer named Mark Rober recruited 50,000 people to try out a new computer challenge. He wanted to prove that anyone could learn how to code, he told them. And so he set them off on a series of relatively easy coding challenges.

In fact, the experiment was more complicated than Rober let on. The key difference came when the participants made an error. Half of them (group 1) received an error message when they wrote code that failed to execute properly: 'You have failed. Please try again.' The other half (group 2) got a slightly different message: 'You have failed. You've lost 5 points.

You now have 195 points. Please try again.' Everything else about the two groups was identical.

This small distinction made an astonishing difference. Group 1, on average, made twelve attempts to solve the coding puzzle, and had a success rate of 68 per cent. Group 2, on average, made just five attempts to solve the puzzle, with a success rate of 52 per cent.

The first time I heard about this experiment I was astonished. Purely because there was an arbitrary, meaningless 'penalty' of five points for failure at the puzzle, the 25,000 people in group 2 (from all around the world) made, on average, less than half the number of attempts at the puzzle than those in group 1.

As you might have guessed, Rober's interest wasn't really in teaching people to code. He was most interested in how we think about failure. His aim was to show that we're hugely, disproportionately impacted by negative consequences – even arbitrary ones. And these consequences make us afraid of failure, even when we needn't be.

But what if there was a different way to look at failures? One that allows us to see them as inevitable, and maybe even fun? This is what Rober was trying to work out. Having worked at NASA for nine years, then at Apple as a project designer, before switching his focus to becoming a science educator on YouTube, Rober's experiment proved what he'd already noticed in the world of work: that success isn't down to how often you fail. It's about how you *frame* your failures.

In a talk where he shared the findings of this experiment, Rober asks: 'If we could just frame our learning process so that we weren't so concerned with failure, how much more could we learn? How much more could we succeed?' Rober knew that getting a computer programme to work invariably requires a process of trying, failing and trying again. These supposed failures are not really failures, they're 'data points' that we need to figure out how to succeed.

In the course of writing this book, I've often felt moved by Rober's insight. Because his study offers a useful insight into how to reduce stress and, in turn, how to create an environment where you can play. Imagine what your life would look like if you *received* five proverbial points for

failing, rather than *losing* five like in the experiment. Imagine what would happen if people cheered you on for a little stumble rather than humiliated you. Imagine how you'd approach things if you treated them as experiments, where failure would be just as valuable as success.

Might you now see the game of life slightly differently? Suddenly, the stakes are lower. And suddenly, you can afford to play around a little.

If your goal is to find a fulfilling career and your hypothesis is that a corporate role might be fulfilling, then your data collection process might be to sample careers through internships and job placements. With an experimental mindset, an internship that you end up hating wouldn't be a 'failure' or a 'waste of time'; it'd just be another data point to help you realise that that's not what you want.

If your goal is to build a successful business, then your data collection process might involve testing different business ideas, products or services. With an experimental mindset, a product launch that doesn't meet expectations wouldn't be a failure or a disaster; it'd just be another data point to help you refine your strategy and better understand your target market.

No failure is ever just a failure. It's an invitation to try something new.

And if your goal is to develop meaningful relationships, then your data collection process might involve going on dates, attending social events and engaging with new people. With an experimental mindset, a date that doesn't lead to a second one or a friendship that doesn't blossom wouldn't be a failure; it'd just be another data point to help you understand your compatibility.

No failure is ever just a failure. It's an invitation to try something new.

EXPERIMENT 6:
Don't Be Serious. Be Sincere

Once we've reframed our failures as data points, it becomes easier to eliminate the stresses that stop us approaching life with a sense of play.

But there’s a final method that’s just as powerful – one that I learned from the world’s unlikeliest Buddhist guru.

Born in Chislehurst, Kent – an unremarkable suburban district of southern England – for the first few years of Alan Watts’ life he seemed destined to become a bank clerk, or maybe a lawyer. He developed an interest in East Asian religion after experiencing a mystical fever dream as a child. It would change his life. Over the next fifty years, he became a leading authority on Eastern philosophy, publishing multiple bestselling books on what Zen and Daoism can teach us about the universe.

When I first stumbled upon Watts’ lectures a few months into writing this book, I was immediately struck by the profundity of his way of seeing the world, and how well that perspective fitted in to my theories of feel-good productivity. And in particular, a simple phrase for which he would become famous: ‘Don’t be serious. Be sincere.’

In one famous lecture, ‘The Individual and the World’, Watts outlined a key mistake we make in understanding the world. He quotes the early-twentieth-century English writer G. K. Chesterton: ‘In frivolity there is a lightness which can rise. But in seriousness is a gravity that falls, like a stone.’ This, he said, was true of people who understood Zen. He summarised it thus: ‘There is a difference between being serious and being sincere.’

What did he mean? Well, consider playing a board game – Monopoly, let’s say. No one wants to play Monopoly with someone who takes the game too seriously. We’ve all played those games; the serious person cares a little too much about winning, and they suck the energy out of the room. Their obsessive quoting from the rulebook regarding whether you’re really allowed to collect £200 for passing GO via a Chance card gets in the way of everyone else’s fun.

But neither do we want to play a game with someone who’s completely uncaring. Those people don’t engage with the game, and don’t make an active effort to play to the best of their ability. They don’t congratulate you when you manage to get out of jail, even though you refused to pay the £50 exit fee and instead went for the bold, daring strategy of rolling a double. They’re no fun either.

No, the most fun people to play games with are people who play sincerely. They take the game seriously enough to be fully engaged in the experience, but not so seriously that they become fixated on winning or losing. They're able to laugh and joke around, to make light of their mistakes, and to enjoy the company of their friends without becoming overly attached to winning (or the rules).

There's a lot to be gained from treating our work and our life with this approach too. I find that in moments when I feel stressed, anxious or drained by my work, it's easy to forget to be sincere and to flip towards being too serious instead. In these moments, the stakes feel overwhelming. But there's a way to lower them. The trick is simple: when you feel like your work is draining or overwhelming, try asking yourself, 'How can I approach this with a little less seriousness, and a little more sincerity?'

If you were approaching a difficult project at work sincerely rather than seriously, you might focus on the process of completing each task, rather than becoming fixated on the end result. You might also seek out the input and collaboration of others, rather than trying to tackle the project on your own. By doing these things, you may find that it's easier to approach it in the spirit of play, and that you're better able to stay focused and motivated throughout.

If you were approaching a job interview sincerely rather than seriously, then instead of becoming overly nervous and stressed about the outcome, you might focus on being present and engaged. You might also try to connect with the interviewer on a more personal level, rather than simply trying to impress them with your credentials. By doing so, you might be more likely to approach the interview with lightness and ease, and to come away from the interview feeling more confident and satisfied with your performance.

And if you were approaching writing a book sincerely rather than seriously, you might decide to throw a detailed homage to World of Warcraft into the very first chapter – illustrating to your future readers that even when creating something as significant as your first book, you can treat the process with levity. By doing so, you'd hopefully help the text

create a sense of fun, even while holding forth on the science of productivity. You might end up able to stress less and play more.

I'm not the only doctor to think so. In the medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*, Dr Derek Shepherd, the handsome neurosurgeon played by Patrick Dempsey, has a ritual at the start of each of his operations.

He greets the team, puts some energising music on in the background and says, 'It's a beautiful day to save lives. Let's have some fun.'

IN SUMMARY

- Seriousness is overrated. If you want to achieve more without ruining your life, the first step is to approach your work with a sense of play.
- There are three ways you can incorporate the spirit of play into your life. First, approach things with a sense of adventure. When you step into the right ‘play personality’, every day abounds with opportunities to see life as a game, filled with surprises and side quests.
- Second, find the fun. Remember Mary Poppins: there’s an element of fun in every task, even if it isn’t always obvious. Try asking yourself what this would look like if it were fun, and then build your projects around the answer.
- Third, lower the stakes. Failures are only failures when you think they are – and not every problem need be approached with such a straight face. So what would it mean to approach your work with less seriousness and more sincerity?

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CHAPTER 2

POWER

In September 2000, Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph attempted to sell their fledgling company, Netflix, to the CEO of Blockbuster Video. It went extremely badly.

The pair had bet on what they thought was a revolutionary model for video rentals. Customers could log in to a website, order DVDs and receive and return them through the post. But while they'd poured everything they had into the company, they were haemorrhaging cash. They had over a hundred employees, but only 3,000 paying customers. And they were on track to lose $57 million before the year was through.

They wanted out. So after months of calling and emailing, they finally secured a meeting with Blockbuster's boss, John Antioco, at the company's headquarters in Dallas. It was a big opportunity: a $6 billion publicly traded company with over 9,000 stores worldwide, Blockbuster dominated the American video market. But the meeting went dramatically off the rails. At first, Antioco and his general counsel, Ed Stead, were friendly and polite. They listened carefully as Hastings and Randolph explained why Blockbuster should buy Netflix: a new type of video rental for an online world. But then, Antioco asked the big question: 'How much?'

'Fifty million.'

There was a moment's silence. And then Antioco burst out laughing.

Fast-forward ten years and Blockbuster Video had filed for bankruptcy: unable to keep up with the pace of the transition to online video, the company had gradually closed the majority of its stores before finally going bust. Fast-forward another ten years and Netflix – by then an online streaming service – was valued at a market cap of $300 billion and universally hailed as one of the world's most innovative companies.

The transformation of Netflix from a company that was literally laughed out of the room by Blockbuster's CEO to one of the most valuable businesses on earth seemed unlikely. How did they do it? Well, there are a few answers. Some credit the vision of Hastings and his team. Others their fortuitous timing in launching just as the internet took off. But the most common explanation for Netflix's success is more simple: culture.

As Netflix was first getting off the ground, Reed Hastings hired Patty McCord as Netflix's chief talent officer. McCord had previously worked in human resources at a few other tech companies, and she wasn't happy with the traditional approach to people management. She wanted to create a culture where employees felt able to take control of their own work. Hastings worked with McCord to create a set of values that would guide the company's culture, including a focus on freedom and responsibility. This subtle shift was transformative. McCord spearheaded a radical shift in the way Netflix approached its staff. She got rid of traditional policies like vacation days, set work hours and performance reviews, and gave more autonomy to employees. As long as employees met their goals, they could do what they liked.

This approach was met with some scepticism at first. But as the company grew and flourished, it became clear it was working. Netflix's culture not only helped the company attract and retain top talent, but also led to better ideas: rather than relying on traditional methods of market research and focus groups, Netflix let their creative teams take the lead in developing and producing new shows and movies. The result was some of the most remarkable TV and film of our time.

McCord summarised her focus on freedom and responsibility in a simple word: power. It's a tricky term, and one that can have negative connotations – conjuring up images of totalitarian dictators, horrible bosses and shadowy hallways where people do whatever they can to grab and hold on to control over others. Some might see the word 'power' and think, 'That's not me.'

If you're one of those people, I want you to start thinking differently about power. When McCord used the word, she meant a sense of personal empowerment: the sense that your job is in *your* control, your life is in *your*

hands, and that decisions about your future are *yours* alone. This power isn't something that we exert on others; it's something we feel, the energy that makes us want to shout from the rooftops: 'I can do it!'

Power is our second energiser; a crucial ingredient in feeling good and being productive. And best of all, it's not something you seize from others – it's something you create for yourself.

BOOST YOUR CONFIDENCE

Our journey into the science of power begins in a lab filled with several dozen exercise-averse volunteers.

This group of twenty-eight female students had been brought together precisely because they did not exercise particularly often – a fact that some scientists at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign thought presented a research opportunity. In their study, published in the *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, they set out to test a simple hypothesis: that our confidence in our athletic abilities has a huge impact on what those abilities actually are.

At the beginning of the experiment, all twenty-eight students were asked to cycle on a stationary bike for a fixed amount of time while a device measured their heart rate and VO_2 max (the amount of oxygen your body can absorb and use during exercise). Once the exercise session was over, the researchers split the students into two groups based on their performance on the exercise bike. After a brief cool-down period, they told students in group A (the 'high confidence' group) that, relative to other women of their age and experience, they were among the fittest. The students in group B (the 'low confidence' group), meanwhile, were told that they were among the least fit. And then both groups of women were left to stew for a few days.

The truth was, the whole thing was a ruse. The 'high confidence' group wasn't actually better at exercise and the 'low confidence' group wasn't actually worse. In fact, they'd been randomly allocated into the two groups and their performance on the exercise test had nothing to do with the message that was delivered. What the scientists were really interested in

was the next stage: three days later, the participants were asked to come back to the lab to exercise for about thirty minutes and asked to rate how much they enjoyed this new session.

The results were striking. The researchers found that those in the ‘high confidence’ group – who had been told how very fit they were – enjoyed the exercise session a lot more than the ‘low confidence’ group, who had been told they were unhealthy. This was even truer for exercise that was more intensive and challenging; when the participants were asked to cycle harder and for longer, the difference between the two groups became even more stark. When the going got tough, those who *believed* they could do it – regardless of their ability – were the ones who actually could. And, crucially, the students who were primed to be more confident ended up enjoying the exercise a lot more too.

This study was exploring a simple question. How does our level of self-confidence affect our performance? The answer to this question – along with those of many such studies before and since – is simple: a great deal. Feeling confident about our ability to complete a task makes us feel good when we’re doing it, and helps us do it better.

The origins of this insight can be traced back to the Canadian-American psychologist Albert Bandura. Born in the tiny town of Mundare, Alberta in 1925, by the time of his death in 2021 Bandura was one of the most influential psychologists in history. That influence was, in large part, down to an idea that he introduced in 1977 and one that would make him famous: self-efficacy. Drawing on his research over the previous decade, Bandura argued that it’s not just our abilities that are important in human performance and wellbeing; it’s how we *feel* about our abilities. Self-efficacy was the term he coined to describe such feelings, referring to how much *belief* we have that we’re able to achieve our objectives.

Believing you can is the first step to making sure you actually can.

To oversimplify just a little, self-efficacy is psychology jargon for confidence. And taking steps to boost it is the primary way we can build our sense of empowerment. In the half-century since Bandura introduced the

concept of self-efficacy, hundreds of researchers have shown that the higher our confidence in our own abilities – the higher our self-efficacy – the greater those abilities become. By 1998, psychologists Alexander Stajkovic and Fred Luthans were able to state (on the basis of 114 studies involving almost 22,000 study participants) that Bandura was right. Believing you can is the first step to making sure you actually can.

EXPERIMENT 1:
The Confidence Switch

The idea of self-efficacy is intriguing, but maybe not that surprising. Of course our levels of self-confidence affect our abilities, you might think. Anyone who's ever seen an egotist charm their way around a room, thanks solely to an unwavering faith in their own brilliance, can attest to that.

But what's more surprising about self-efficacy, perhaps, is quite how malleable it is. Because from the moment Bandura began investigating the science of confidence, he noticed something else striking: that self-efficacy is easy to teach. After decades of research, he concluded that confidence isn't something you're born with; it's something you learn.

In the years after he introduced his revolutionary idea, Bandura would go on to identify a few simple tools that can have a transformative impact on self-efficacy. Take the power of verbal persuasion. Bandura was fond of pointing out a simple truth about self-efficacy: that the things you say often become the things you believe. As such, the very act of hearing small positive interventions, like 'You can do it!' or 'Nearly there!', can have a remarkable effect on our self-confidence levels.

Usually, we imagine that the source of these uplifting phrases will be our family, friends, colleagues or personal trainers. What's more intriguing is that we can also deliver these messages to ourselves.

In 2014, scientists at Bangor University published results from a study into the power of self-talk. Each participant was tested on their 'time to exhaustion' – that is, how long they could cycle for before they felt unable to go on. Then, like our previous group of exhausted cyclists, they were left to ruminate for two weeks. This time, however, the second stage was

different. When they returned to the bikes after a fortnight, they were divided into two groups. One got a positive self-talk intervention, where they were shown a series of motivational phrases, like ‘You’re doing well!’ and ‘You can push through this!’ and chose four of them to tell themselves while cycling. The other group got no such prompt.

Surely such tiny acts of self-motivation couldn’t single-handedly transform the participants’ performance, the scientists thought. Except it turned out, they could. The group that got the specific ‘self-talk intervention’ ended up significantly reducing their RPE (‘rate of perceived exertion’, or how effortful the cycling felt) at the 50 per cent mark, and noticeably improving their TTE (‘time to exhaustion’) when cycling. The other group performed exactly the same as they had previously.

This study shows that simply by becoming your own hype team you can dramatically impact your own productivity. In the years since I read it, I’ve come up with a few specific ways you can do so. My favourite method involves what I call ‘flipping the confidence switch’; in other words, challenging yourself to behave *as if* you’re confident in your task, even if you’re not.

The method is even more simple than it sounds. The next time you’re not feeling good enough to take a chance, simply ask yourself, ‘What would it look like if I were really confident at this? What would it look like if I approached this task feeling confident that I could do it?’

I used to use this trick extensively when I worked as a walkaround magician at balls and parties at university (yes, I was that cool). My job would be to dress up in a tuxedo, go up to groups of partygoers and offer to show them a few magic tricks. Even though I’d practised my tricks ad nauseum (just ask any of my friends), I’d still be absolutely terrified at the idea of approaching a group of strangers, interrupting their conversation and stumbling over my words as I offered to show them my favourite card trick. In those moments of self-doubt, I’d take a deep breath, and internally flip the confidence switch. I’d remind myself that I was just *playing the part* of a confident magician, and even if I didn’t feel at all confident internally, I was going to act as if I were both confident *and* competent. Without fail, the shift in my attitude made a huge difference; I’d walk up to groups of

strangers with a smile and a slight swagger, my lines well rehearsed, and I'd come away from each group feeling relieved that the strategy had worked.

I've often surprised myself at quite how impactful this method can be. Just for a moment, it's enough to turn an amateur magician into a professional. A terrible amateur musician into a guitar hero. And a nervous public speaker into the most charismatic orator.

Next time you're feeling like a task or project is particularly difficult, ask yourself, 'What would it look like if I were really confident at this?' Just by asking yourself the question, you'll visualise yourself confidently approaching the task at hand. The switch has been flipped.

EXPERIMENT 2:
The Social Model Method

Verbal persuasion wasn't the only method Bandura came up with for boosting self-confidence. He was also interested in the way we get confidence from the people around us.

My favourite study showing how this works comes from the Clemson University Outdoor Lab. This is not your ordinary science laboratory, mind. Nestled on a wooded peninsula by Lake Hartwell in South Carolina, the lab boasts a series of wooden cabins, hiking trails and water-sports equipment – with not a petri dish in sight. But the recreational veneer of the lab hides its serious scientific function. Over the years, the laboratory has been the site of many pioneering psychological experiments. Like the 2007 study of thirty-eight children, aged six to eighteen, who were invited to use the university's climbing wall.

When they first arrived at the lab, the students were told that their objective for the day was to make it to the top of the rock-climbing wall (one of the main features of Clemson's Outdoor Lab). It was a daunting prospect; most of them had never even seen a climbing wall before. The scientists who were running the study were interested in which students would complete the task – and what might make them more likely to do so.

Unbeknown to the children, they'd been split into two groups before their arrival. Group 1 had been shown a short video of someone climbing up a wall that looked very similar to the one at the location, while group 2

hadn’t been shown any videos at all. In every other way, the groups were identical.

Amazingly, just watching that video had a dramatic effect. Even though both groups of climbers were given the same instructions when they first arrived at the wall, the group that watched the ‘model’ rock climber ascend the wall they were about to tackle ended up doing a lot better. They felt more confident about their rock-climbing abilities, enjoyed the activity more and performed better.

Why did this small change make such a big difference? If Albert Bandura were to comment he’d probably attribute it to something called the ‘vicarious mastery experience’. This is when you witness or hear about someone else’s performance related to a task that you’re going to undertake yourself. You see other people’s examples, and it boosts your confidence.

Most of us have experienced vicarious mastery, even if we didn’t have the words for it. Picture this. You’re struggling with a big research project at work. You’re the only person working on the task and it feels daunting. After a few days of alarming unproductivity, you start to conclude it’s not only hard – it’s *impossible*. As you get more and more convinced that what you’re attempting is completely unachievable, you get further and further off target.

Now imagine the same task, except this time, before starting the project, you saw someone else present their research project on a similar theme. The content of their presentation is entirely different to yours. But this time, you know that this kind of task isn’t impossible – you’ve just seen someone else pull it off. You’ve become more confident that the task can be mastered. Vicariously.

Bandura argued that being surrounded by other people who show persistence and effort in overcoming challenges can increase our own feelings of self-efficacy because they demonstrate to us that these challenges *can* be overcome. In the words of Bandura, ‘Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort raises observers’ beliefs that they too possess the capabilities to master comparable activities to succeed.’

Like positive self-talk, we can integrate these vicarious mastery experiences into our own lives. My favourite way is by consuming different

forms of content created by my role models. I've found that my sense of confidence increases substantially when I read books, listen to podcasts or watch videos with stories of people succeeding in the areas in which I want to feel more empowered.

For example, while working in hospital, I'd often listen to the *RCP Medicine* podcast, produced by the Royal College of Physicians, on the way to work. Hearing about how different doctors approach different diagnoses and management would give me a boost of confidence that would carry over into my job.

When I was building my first online business, I spent a lot of time listening to the *Indie Hackers* podcast, which featured interviews with entrepreneurs who'd built incredible one-person online businesses from their bedrooms. They talked about the challenges they'd faced and how they'd overcome them, which boosted my own confidence when it came to dealing with similar challenges.

And in my new life as a writer, I find that watching, listening to and even conducting interviews with successful authors does more to boost my own feelings of 'I can do this' than almost anything else.

If they can, you can too.

It's a toolkit anyone can draw upon. Find people who are going through the same challenges as you and spend time with them – or find other ways to hear their stories. By immersing yourself in vicarious success, you'll be building a powerful story in your own mind: that if they can, you can too.

LEVEL UP YOUR SKILLS

Anakin Skywalker begins his journey as an eight-year-old on Tatooine who races drones to try and make enough money to feed his family. Over the next three instalments of *Star Wars*, he learns to use the Force, trains with the lightsaber and grows into one of the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy.

Katniss Everdeen begins her journey as a sixteen-year-old from District 12, where she hunts illegally to provide for her mother and younger sister.

After she volunteers to compete in the deadly Hunger Games, we see her becoming a skilled archer and strategist, forming unexpected alliances, and leading a rebellion against the oppressive Capitol. Despite the odds always being against her, she becomes a symbol of hope and resistance to the whole nation: the fabled Mockingjay.

And in a personal favourite, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, our protagonist Aang starts off as a kid from a small village, struggling to control his powers over the element of air. Through the series, he explores the world; we see him eventually growing into the powerful Avatar, with mastery over all four elements (earth, air, water and fire). At the end of the series he even saves the world from destruction in an epic showdown with the Fire Lord Ozai.

These three narrative arcs, among thousands of others in stories and tales across millennia, illustrate a way we can boost our sense of power. Each main character begins their story as a young, inexperienced apprentice. Over time, we watch, read or hear as they overcome challenging obstacles and grow as people – each one of their successes contributing to the next, and the next, and the next.

Our friend Albert Bandura has a catchy name for the way these learning experiences compound – enactive mastery experiences. Enactive mastery is the flipside of the vicarious mastery we've just encountered. According to Bandura, an enactive mastery experience refers to the process of learning through doing.

Learning through doing is one of the most powerful forces in human psychology. It's the second key strategy if we're to build our sense of power. Why? Because the more we do something, the greater our sense of control. We learn. We level up our skills. Our confidence grows. And we empower ourselves.

EXPERIMENT 3:
The Shoshin Approach

What's most interesting about these learning experiences is that they can be built into your life with relative ease. Even in areas where you

feel like you're making no progress whatsoever, you can harness the potential of enactive mastery.

I learned my favourite way to do so from the story of Phil Jackson. Most basketball fans will know a little about Jackson already. They might know he was the coach who transformed the culture of the Chicago Bulls in the 1980s. They might know about how, as head coach, he led his team to so many NBA championships in the 1990s that it started to get a little embarrassing. (Six, if you're interested.) Or they might know that it was Jackson, more than any other coach, who helped turn Michael Jordan into a legend.

What they tend not to know, however, is the unlikely origin of Jackson's sporting philosophy: Zen Buddhism.

Zen is a branch of Buddhism that emphasises the practice of meditation as a means to spiritual enlightenment. Zen encourages individuals to look inward and discover their own path to understanding the nature of reality. It was, according to Jackson, integral to every success he ever had.

One Zen concept that came up time and again in Jackson's coaching practices was the Japanese word *shoshin*, which roughly translates as 'beginner's mind'. Shoshin refers to a state of mind in which we approach every task and situation with the curiosity, openness and humility of a beginner.

It might sound odd that adopting a beginner's mind helps you become more of an expert in that field. Surely a beginner is someone who, by definition, has no idea what they are doing? However, shoshin can have a remarkable impact precisely *because* it allows us to see things afresh.

Think about a skill you've spent years learning. You probably have a set way of doing it; if you like to draw, you know which part of a portrait you prefer to start first. If you play sport, you probably decided long ago which position on the pitch best suits your talents. Your experiences have made you much more set in your ways than you once were.

A beginner, on the other hand, has none of these preconceptions. A beginner is more willing to try things out, even if they might fail. A beginner will start with whichever part of somebody's portrait tickles their fancy. And a beginner is happy to start off playing anywhere on the field,

even if they might make a fool of themselves. They're more willing to make mistakes, and these mistakes are precisely what's needed to learn.

When we try to see the world with a fresh perspective, we can maintain this learning process long after it would usually stop. To the Chicago Bulls, this meant approaching each moment with an open mind, free of bias towards any set path or strategy. And according to Jackson, this was the foundation of his team's success.

So how can we integrate this beginner's outlook into our lives? The answer starts with giving yourself some simple reminders.

If you're in the world of business, shoshin might mean embracing innovation and experimentation, reminding yourself that 'masters' become limited by their beliefs in what's been done and how, while beginners seek new approaches to problem-solving and explore new markets or opportunities. Or if you work in creative fields like writing or music, shoshin might mean deliberately maintaining your interest in different techniques, and pushing yourself to collaborate with people with different styles. Beginners don't hold strong beliefs about what will work, they just try.

By letting go of the idea that we know everything, or somehow *should*, we actually feel more powerful. In this way, shoshin can help us approach challenges with a greater sense of curiosity, humility and resilience – and help us to learn.

EXPERIMENT 4:
The Protégé Effect

While studying for my psychology degree, I was pleased to learn that older siblings tend to have, on average, slightly higher IQs than their younger siblings. I'd long wondered why I found my little brother so annoying when we were kids. Now I knew.

Scientists have tried to come up with various explanations for this phenomenon over the years. Could it be that parents tend to invest more time and energy into their firstborn children than their siblings? Could it be that firstborn children are more likely to engage with adults, which helps develop their vocabularies? Or could it be that parents are more likely to

have higher expectations from their first child than from any subsequent children, which nudges firstborns to try harder in school?

The jury's still out, but one interesting explanation stems from a study carried out by researchers at Stanford's School of Education in 2009. The researchers brought sixty-two 8th-graders into a biology class, where they were randomly assigned to one of two groups. The first group was told to study and learn the material as they normally would, with the goal of performing well on a test at the end of the class. The second group was told that they would be teaching the material to a computer-generated avatar, and that their performance would be evaluated based on how well their digital 'student' learned the material.

At the end of the class, both groups took the same test to assess their mastery of the material. Strangely, the researchers found that the students in the second group, who taught the material to a computer-generated student, learned better than the students in the first group who'd studied for the test alone. In identical circumstances, with identical material, the people who had to teach others about a subject would learn the material better themselves. The researchers named this phenomenon the 'protégé effect'.

In the years since, researchers in the field of human intelligence have suggested that perhaps older siblings on average have higher IQs and perform better in school than their younger counterparts because of this very phenomenon. Older siblings take on the role of teacher or mentor to their siblings: older siblings (like me) often help their younger siblings (like my brother) with homework, answer their questions about the world, and share their own experiences and insights, however dubious.

The protégé effect hints at another way we can boost the number of learning experiences in our lives. As the philosopher Seneca said, *Qui docet discit* – 'He who teaches learns'. And once you understand the power of the protégé effect, it becomes surprisingly easy to take on the role of 'teacher' in almost any role.

Say you work in software development; you might offer to mentor a junior developer or intern. By explaining complex coding concepts and best practices to someone else, you'll be forced to think more deeply about them yourself, leading to a deeper understanding and improved skill level.

Or say you work in sales. You might offer to train new sales reps or host workshops for your team. By sharing your techniques and strategies with others, you'll be able to refine your own skills and gain new insights into the sales process. And you'll also be helping to develop the skills of your colleagues, which will ultimately benefit the entire team.

You don't need to be a guru. You can just be a guide.

And if you're concerned that you're not 'qualified' enough to teach someone else, it's worth remembering that the people we learn from best are often the ones who are just a step ahead of us in the journey. So anyone can become a teacher.

You don't need to be a guru. You can just be a guide.

TAKE OWNERSHIP OF YOUR WORK

Starting in the early 1970s, the psychologist Edward Deci became intrigued by a simple question. What motivates people to do hard things?

This was a theme that had fascinated him since the very beginning of his career. Just one year after completing his PhD at Carnegie Mellon University in 1970, he published an influential paper in which he asked people to solve a puzzle called the Soma cube (a little like a Rubik's Cube). He found that those who were offered a financial reward for solving the puzzle were, weirdly, less likely to enjoy the task and were more likely to give up solving the puzzle after the reward was removed, compared to those who weren't offered any money at all.

The material reward seemed to make people less engaged with a task, not more. This led Deci to conclude that the offer of a material reward can, peculiarly, *decrease* motivation.

When, in 1977, Deci met another young psychologist, Richard Ryan, the pair embarked on a professional relationship that would transform how the world thinks about motivation. Over the next twenty years, Ryan and Deci developed a completely new way to think about why we do hard things. Their contribution culminated in 1981 with their statement of 'self-determination theory'.

Until that point, most scientists had thought that motivation was mainly driven by incentives like rewards and punishments. But Deci and Ryan showed otherwise.

They encouraged readers to see motivation falling on a spectrum, with ‘extrinsic’ at one end and ‘intrinsic’ at the other. Intrinsic motivation comes from the inside: driven by self-fulfilment, curiosity and a genuine desire to learn. Extrinsic motivation comes from the outside: driven by pay-rises, material rewards and social approval. But these forms of motivation were not equal. According to self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation is substantially more powerful than extrinsic motivation. Lasting motivation comes from within.

But that wasn’t where Deci and Ryan’s theory ended. Because they also showed that intrinsic motivation is something that can be built up. As early as the 1980s, they were demonstrating that intrinsic motivation can be enhanced by a handful of forces, chief among them our sense of ‘autonomy’. In layperson’s terms, that’s a sense of ownership. And it’s our final contributor to the sense of power that energises us and our work.

The Motivation Spectrum

Deci and Ryan argued that when people feel they have power over their own actions, they’re much more likely to be intrinsically motivated to engage in them. That’s why the Soma cube experiment found that monetary rewards reduce people’s motivation. They don’t feel like they fully ‘own’ the task – but that they’re undertaking it for some external reward. Their sense of control declines, and so does their sense of motivation.

This rings true in our own lives. Our need for control is why we hate being micromanaged by our bosses and our parents. Our need for control is why we love to decorate our bedrooms when we're kids (or design our homes as adults). And when our control over our lives is taken away – if we end up in prison, or shackled to a job we don't enjoy – it can have disastrous consequences for our physical and mental health.

The trouble is that taking control isn't always straightforward. Sure, some of us have jobs in which we have plenty of ownership over our day-to-day lives. Successful entrepreneurs have autonomy over the direction of their business. Digital nomads are free to trot around the globe, working from any cafe they come across. Others don't and can't. A hotel receptionist *has* to stand at the desk to greet and welcome guests – he can't just choose to work from home. A junior doctor on the hospital ward has to see *all* the patients on the list – she can't just decide to ignore the patients who are rude to her.

But what makes the concept of ownership so powerful is that you can integrate it into almost any situation. All too often, when we find ourselves in a situation we don't like, we start feeling fatalistic. 'I don't like where I live, but it's not in my power to move.' 'I don't like where this relationship is going, but it's not in my power to alter it.' 'I find this work boring, but it's not in my power to change it.'

Sometimes, we're right: there is nothing we can do. But often we have more agency than we realise – if not over the whole situation, then over parts of it. We have control even when we don't know it.

EXPERIMENT 5:
Own the Process

My favourite example of humans' remarkable ability to take ownership of bad situations comes from FiletOfFish1066.

In June 2016, the gentleman behind the Reddit account FiletOfFish1066 made headlines for getting fired. He'd been working as a software developer at his company for six years, where his work mostly involved testing software in the quality assurance department. It was deeply boring.

All he did was run the same old tests on the same old software, following the same old scripts every time.

So FiletOfFish1066 came up with a plan. Without alerting his boss, he spent the first eight months of his employment programming software to automate his job. From then on, the custom programs he'd written worked on autopilot, running the quality-assurance tests perfectly. His boss never checked on him, because everything was going well. As he wrote in a post on Reddit after being fired: 'From around six years ago up until now, I have done nothing at work. I am not joking. For forty hours each week I go to work, play League of Legends in my office, browse Reddit, and do whatever I feel like. In the past six years I have maybe done fifty hours of real work. So basically nothing. And nobody really cared.'

Unfortunately for FiletOfFish1066, over half a decade into his ingenious plan someone at IT figured out what was going on and reported it to his boss. He was sacked for having the audacity to automate his own job.

I'm not suggesting that FiletOfFish1066 was someone with an impeccable career strategy – nor that he was a paragon of virtue. But I do suspect that FiletOfFish1066's actions hint at the first way we can build our sense of ownership, even in situations in which we have little independence. When we can't take ownership of the situation, we can still take ownership of the process.

When we can't take ownership of the situation, we can still take ownership of the process.

FiletOfFish1066 had realised that he might not have ownership over *what* he did as he had to do what his boss said. But he chose to take ownership over *how* he did it. There were plenty of things he didn't have any influence over: the software he was testing, the priorities of his manager, the amount of work he was given. But there were plenty of tasks that were entirely in his hands: how he got through that to-do list, how he managed his time, how he made use of the tools he was given. That was how he realised that his job could be automated, and came to spend eight months building the systems and processes to do just that.

There’s a lesson here for us all. There’s almost always a way for us to own the *process* of a task, even when the *outcome* has been determined by someone else. If you work in customer service, you may not have control over the company’s policies. But you can take ownership of how you interact with customers. You can make an effort to listen to their concerns, empathise with their frustrations and find creative solutions to their problems.

If you’re a teacher, you may not have control over the curriculum. But you can take ownership of how you teach the material. You can find innovative ways to engage your students, create fun activities that reinforce the concepts and give personalised feedback that helps each student improve.

And if you work in a factory or on an assembly line, you may not have control over the production goals. But you can take ownership of how you contribute to the process. You can find ways to streamline your tasks, identify potential quality issues before they become problems and offer suggestions for process improvements.

There’s an extraordinary power to be gained by doing it your way. Even in the most disempowering circumstances.

EXPERIMENT 6:
Own Your Mindset

The final way to build our sense of intrinsic motivation is one I developed while working as a junior doctor. I first encountered it towards the end of a long shift in the obstetrics and gynaecology ward. Just as I was preparing to leave, one of the nurses stopped me and asked, ‘Dr Ali, please can you put this intravenous (IV) line into the lady in bed 4?’

My heart sank. I knew the patient’s veins would be tough to find, and trying to put this line in her was going to delay my leaving the hospital for at least another half-hour. As I gathered the equipment, I felt an undercurrent of resentment. If I’d just left a few minutes earlier, it would’ve been the night doctor’s job to put the line in. I could’ve been driving home, picking up a McDonald’s on the way, listening to an audiobook. Now, I had to stay behind and sort this annoying task out.

But then I overheard a patient in another bay talking to her husband. She was gushing about how wonderful her experience of hospital had been and how grateful she was for the doctors and nurses looking after her. It made me pause. I was about to use my medical training and practical skills to put in an IV line, so that we could give a young lady, twelve weeks pregnant with her first child, fluids overnight to help with her nausea. It was to make her feel much better. And it was going to help the baby growing inside her as well.

How could I possibly be grumbling about this? This was the job I'd chosen. I'd been through eight years of medical training to get to the point where I could be helpful to a patient suffering in front of me. And now that I was finally given the chance to really make a difference, I was complaining about an extra few minutes of work.

I couldn't choose whether or not to put in the IV drip, I realised. But I could change my mindset. I recalled an idea I'd first encountered in an interview with the writer Seth Godin. Wandering around with a frown and thinking, 'Why do I have to do this?' was a decision. And I could decide to think about it another way. 'I choose to do this,' I could tell myself. 'I get to do this.' Or even, 'I'm blessed to do this.'

With this mindset shift – from 'have to' to 'choose to' – I walked into the patient's bay with a spring in my step and a smile on my face, ready to help insert the line.

I'm not the first person to have drawn upon this method. In 2021, a group of academics crafted an ingenious set of studies designed to test whether the mere *idea* of owning ones actions could affect their perceptions and behaviours. Half the participants were randomly assigned to a group where they were asked to write about three choices they'd made the previous day, for example: 'I chose to wake up early yesterday'; 'I chose to eat instant noodles for lunch'; 'I chose to wake up on my second alarm and move on with my day.' The other half of the participants were instead asked to just write about three things they did the previous day: 'I ate breakfast'; 'I went shopping'; 'I went to the gym.'

Once both groups had done the writing task, they were asked to reflect on their lives more broadly. In one part of the study, the participants were

asked to rate themselves in terms of physical strength, answering questions like, ‘How muscular are you?’; ‘How physically strong are you?’ and ‘How well built are you?’ on a 5-point scale. The ones who remembered their *choices* subsequently rated themselves as significantly more muscular, strong and well-built compared to the control group. As the authors put it: ‘Increasing the salience of choice led to a sense of self-inflation … a sense of being positively different, bigger, and stronger than others’. Simply switching their mindset from ‘*have* to’ to ‘*choose* to’ they boosted their sense of control, power and, in turn, what they were capable of.

You can do the same. ‘Have to’ is coercive language that makes you feel powerless. ‘Choose to’ is autonomy-affirming language that makes you feel powerful. Whenever you feel you *must* do something, think again. How did your choices lead you to this moment? And is there a way to turn this ‘have to’ into a ‘choose to’? And if you’re doing something you really didn’t choose, what choices can you make around your approach?

Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist and survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War Two, put it beautifully: ‘Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.’

IN SUMMARY

- ‘Power’ is a scary word, but it doesn’t have to be. When we say the second energiser is power, we don’t mean exerting control over others. Here, we simply mean feeling empowered to take your job, life and future into your own hands.
- There are three ways you can increase your sense of power, starting now. Begin with confidence. We think our confidence is fixed, but actually it’s extremely malleable. So why not try ‘flipping the confidence switch’ – and playing the role of someone who’s *already* filled with self-belief?
- Next, level up your skills. Ask yourself: if I were completely new to this task, what would this look like? And how can I start teaching others even though I’m not an expert yet?
- Finally, see what you can do to take ownership, even in moments when you don’t have as much control as you’d like. Remember, if you can’t choose *what* you work on, you can still choose *how* you work on it. The outcome isn’t always in your hands. But the process, and certainly your mindset, often is.

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CHAPTER 3

PEOPLE

Have you ever noticed that after hanging out or working with certain people, you feel like you're ready to take on the world? These are the people who uplift your spirits and fill you with energy. You want to be around them.

On the other hand, you've also probably come across people who leave you feeling drained and exhausted after every interaction. It's as if they cast a shadow over your mood and motivation. People learn to avoid them like the plague. And they learn fast.

A friend of mine refers to the latter group as 'energy vampires'. They suck the lifeblood out of a social situation leaving everybody in the vicinity exhausted. When I first heard of the term 'energy vampire', I thought it was a bit too harsh and a bit too fantastical. But she had a point.

Scientists have long been aware of what they call 'relational energy': the fact that our interactions with others can have a profound effect on our mood. In a study in 2003, psychology professors Rob Cross, Wayne Baker and Andrew Parker came up with the concept of an 'energy map'. They worked with consultants and managers in a few giant firms to establish who worked with whom, and the impact that any given person had on other people's energy levels. Their discovery? That there was a remarkable amount of agreement about who was an energiser (and who was a drainer) even at the level of large organisations. Some people are just a total nightmare to be around.

In the years since, relational energy has become one of the buzziest concepts in organisational science. Defined as 'the positive feeling and sense of increased resourcefulness experienced as a direct result of an

interaction with someone else', relational energy was the subject of only eight studies in 2010; by 2018 the number was closer to eighty.

So relational energy provides us with our final energiser: people. As that 2003 study showed, people can enhance our mood and make us more productive. But this isn't a given. It requires deep thought about how we connect with each other. In this chapter, we'll explore various ways we can surround ourselves with people to feel more energised, and to do more of the things that matter.

FIND YOUR SCENE

Our first insight into the feel-good effects of people comes from the world of 1970s glam rock.

It was the beginning of a new decade, and Brian Eno looked to be on his way to a life of contented mediocrity. A recent graduate of the Winchester School of Art, he had been involved in a few avant-garde music projects in recent years – drumming in the odd art rock band and recording the odd song on his battered tape recorder – but nothing had quite taken off. He seemed set for a life as a well-liked but peripheral player in London's rock world.

And then, one day in 1971, a chance encounter with a local musician changed everything. Eno was waiting for his train when he bumped into an acquaintance, the saxophonist Andy Mackay, who invited him to a local club where he was playing. When they arrived at the gig, the atmosphere was electric: the crowd was buzzing with excitement and the energy in the room gripped Eno. Later, he would say of the chance meeting with Mackay, 'If I'd walked ten yards further on the platform, or missed that train, or been in the next carriage, I probably would have been an art teacher now.'

Instead, Eno found himself in the midst of a vibrant and exciting music scene. In the weeks that followed, he talked to the people he met about music – and found himself producing the best art of his life. With Mackay, he would found the influential glam rock band Roxy Music – and eventually become one of the most significant musicians and producers of the last century.

Years later, Eno would reflect on the importance of that unique musical community in launching his career. He noticed that all the most innovative and ground-breaking musicians of his time were not working in isolation; they were part of a larger scene of artists, producers and fans who were all pushing each other to explore new sounds and ideas. Eno had discovered the genius of the collective scene. Or, as he called it, *scenius*.

I've experienced the effects of scenius first-hand. One thing I didn't like about medical school was the sense of competition. Everyone was trying to get the highest grade, the academic prize, the best slot in the residency programme. Some took this competitive mindset a little far. One guy I knew would take out multiple copies of the same textbook from the library so that others couldn't use it. Such environments encourage people to see their lives as a zero-sum game: for them to win, others have to lose.

But there's another way to think about your relationship with your peers, I eventually learned. Medical school wasn't a competition. We were all part of the same scene. By understanding that fact, we were able to access a wealth of support that we would never have alone.

EXPERIMENT 1:
The Comrade Mindset

How can we build this sense of scenius into our day-to-day lives? The answer begins with a subtle shift: reappraising what we mean by teamwork.

When someone says the word 'teamwork', we tend to imagine a set of behaviours – splitting up work fairly, or maybe helping someone out when they get stuck. That's part of it, certainly. But there's another way of understanding teamwork: less as something to do, and more as a way of thinking.

Teamwork is as much a psychological state as a way of dividing up tasks.

This is the suggestion of Stanford professors Gregory Walton and Priyanka Carr, anyway. They've argued that teamwork is as much a

psychological state as a way of dividing up tasks. In a study published in 2014, they divided thirty-five participants into groups of three to five. After the experimentees had met and introduced themselves, they were taken into individual rooms. The scientists then gave each participant a puzzle and told them they could take as much or as little time to solve it as they needed.

After working on their puzzles for several minutes, all participants received a handwritten tip on how to solve them. All the tips were the same (and were genuinely helpful). But there was one crucial difference. When some participants were given the tip, they were told it had been written for them by the scientist running the study. Others were told it had been written for them by one of the fellow participants, who they'd met earlier.

This small difference had a significant impact on how the participants felt about the experiment. Those who were told that the tip was from the scientists were more likely to feel like they were working completely separately from the participants they met. When asked to describe what they did in the study, some replied, 'I did an individual puzzle while other people did the same puzzle.' They were working in parallel, not together.

In contrast, people who were told that the tip was from a fellow student were more likely to feel as if they were on a team with the others; they felt like they were 'trying to collaborate with an invisible partner to solve the problem by sending each other tips'. When asked how they felt during the study, some participants wrote, 'I would feel obligated to work hard on the puzzle so as not to disappoint other people.' They were no longer working in parallel. They were working together.

This subtle change of mindset had a remarkable effect. Participants in the 'together' group ended up working on the puzzle for 48 per cent longer. They had developed what I call a comrade mindset. And they were doing better as a result.

This subtle difference – between 'working in parallel' and 'working together' – might seem small. But it hints at the first tool we can use to harness the energising effects of people. Even if we're on our own in undertaking a task, we can convince ourselves that we're part of a team – and do so with remarkable ease.

The trick is to deliberately think about the people you're working alongside as part of your team. Look at the following list. What would it take to move your focus away from the column on the left, and towards the column on the right? What would it look like if these people weren't competitors, but comrades. If you're an employee, could you recruit people to work with you and rely on each other for moral support? If you're a student, can you share your notes or find ways to revise in groups?

Competitor mindset	**Comrade mindset**
'You win, I lose'	'You win, I win'
'My success'	'Our success'
'I rise by outdoing others'	'We rise by lifting others'

As Walton concluded, 'Simply feeling as if you're part of a team of people working on a task makes people more motivated as they take on challenges.' When the going gets tough, it's better to have friends to lean on than enemies to lord it over.

EXPERIMENT 2:
Find Synchronicity

There are moments when it can be difficult to find people to collaborate with, of course. Sometimes, it can be hard to force yourself to think about people working on the other side of the campus (let alone world) as part of the same team. Sometimes, our peers can simply be rather annoying.

In these moments, we can draw upon a second tool, one I first came across via a confoundingly clever study by three academics at Ryerson University in Canada. In a 2017 paper, these academics brought together a group of 100 students to investigate the science of teamwork. After being divided into groups of six, the students were given headphones and asked to tap their hand on the table to a musical beat. Some groups of six were briefly all given the same musical beat – so they were tapping in synchrony. In other groups of six, two subgroups of three were given the same music to

tap to. Finally, some people were given six completely different soundtracks, so there was no synchrony at all.

After that, the headphones were taken away, and replaced by some new props. Each participant was now given ten tokens to dole out, which they were told would be converted into real money later. Who did they want to give them to?

What the scientists were interested in testing was the sense of camaraderie between the participants who were ‘in sync’. And they found that the level of musical synchronicity changed everything. When participants spent time tapping fingers in synchrony with the trio, they wanted to dole out money to the trio. But if two of these trios tapped in sync – forming a group of six for a few minutes – the members were more likely to donate to all six.

Synchronicity makes us want to help others. And it makes us want to help ourselves.

What does any of this have to do with the feel-good effects of other people? Well, it tells us something powerful about how to create a sense of teamwork. When we work in synchrony with other people, we tend to be more productive. Synchronicity makes us want to help others. And it makes us want to help ourselves.

The implications are simple: if we want to harness the feel-good effects of people, try to find people with whom to work in sync – even if you aren’t actively collaborating on the same task. In the course of writing this book, I often attended the London Writers’ Salon, which runs a free, remote co-working group called Writers’ Hour. Every weekday, four times a day, a few hundred writers (and some non-writers) assemble on a Zoom video call. The facilitator spends five minutes sharing a motivational message and asking participants to post in the online chat what their intention for their writing session is going to be. Then, for fifty minutes, everyone minimises their Zoom window, and works away at their computer.

I continue to find these sync sessions incredibly helpful for staying energised. Even though we’re all working on different things, working in

tandem with others has huge effects on my ability to focus, and helps me feel better too.

FEEL THE HELPER'S HIGH

I noticed something else in those virtual writing sessions. With time, I got to know the other people in my group; soon, we'd start messaging each other for support on Zoom. And that would eventually lead me to another dimension of relational energy: the effect of giving and receiving help.

It's an effect that Allan Luks understands better than anyone. As the head of Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City, Luks was responsible for a network of thousands of volunteers and staff members who were dedicated to improving the lives of young people in New York City. The work could be difficult, and often upsetting. The organisation matched adult mentors with children and teenagers, who were often in the throes of huge family crises – ranging from imprisonment to addiction to suicide. Luks was passionate about the importance of mentorship and the impact it could have on young people. But it was tough.

And yet as his months at Big Brothers Big Sisters turned to years, Luks started to notice something odd. Yes, the volunteers were sometimes left exhausted or upset by what they experienced. But more often, they left even the trickiest mentoring sessions highly energised. Luks began to realise that the act of giving could transform not only the lives of the people being helped, but also the lives of the volunteers themselves.

Intrigued by this phenomenon, over the next few years he interviewed thousands of volunteers who had experience helping others. They all said they chose to do this work because, in part, it made them feel great. He found that 95 per cent of the volunteers reported feeling happier, more fulfilled and more energised as a result of their service.

Why might that be? Luks's research showed that when we help others, our brains release a flood of chemicals that create a natural high. Feel-good hormones like oxytocin surge through our bodies, creating a wave of positive energy that can last for hours – even days – after the helping has ended.

Luks realised that the ‘helper’s high’ wasn’t just a feeling. It was a powerful tool for growth, social change and, I would add, feel-good productivity. It’s the second way we can use the feel-good effects of other people to do more of what matters to us.

EXPERIMENT 3:
Random Acts of Kindness

When I worked as a doctor, whenever I had a few minutes spare between seeing patients, I’d get up to make myself a cup of tea.

On one level, this was a selfish act; I am, arguably, Britain’s leading tea connoisseur. But I also had half an eye on the wider team. On my way to the kitchen, I’d poke my head into the nurses’ office and ask if anyone would like me to make them a cup too. This tiny act seemed to have a weirdly significant effect on team morale. I vividly remember offering Julie, one of the senior nurses, a cup of tea at the height of the Covid pandemic; she looked like I’d just offered her a winning lottery ticket. All for a lowly teabag, some hot water and a splash of milk (crucially, in that order).

These random acts of kindness offer the first way to integrate the helper’s high into our day-to-day lives. By stopping what you’re doing and offering help to people at random, you can boost your endorphin levels and help yourself work harder.

Tea is not the only such act of kindness, of course. You can integrate kindnesses into every day, whatever your situation. Say you work in an office. Have you noticed that someone around you looks bored, or a little burned out? Why not take them out for lunch instead of having a sandwich at your desk?

Or perhaps you’re in the supermarket and someone behind you looks stressed – maybe they have young children. Why not let them go in front of you in the queue?

Or say someone has done you an act of kindness, even a little one; they’ve taken a task that was on your to-do list at a busy time. Why not write them a personalised thank-you note?

There are any number of these random acts of kindness. Making a colleague a drink. Writing a friend a thank-you note. Offering a stranger your place in line. All subtle. But all subtly transformative too.

EXPERIMENT 4:
Ask for Help from Others

The helper's high also shows us that asking for help from others can actually be a gift to them, rather than the burden we usually assume it will be.

This was an epiphany experienced by the young Benjamin Franklin – the polymathic founding father of the United States, who, over his 84-year life, would philosophise on the nature of statecraft, found Philadelphia's first fire department, and sign the US Declaration of Independence. In 1737, though, all that was far ahead of him. Franklin was running for re-election in the Pennsylvania Assembly. A rival legislator was saying some unfavourable things about him. He had completely opposing views to Franklin, and they had a strained – often frosty – relationship.

Franklin desperately needed to stop this man's propaganda campaign against him; it was at risk of blowing up his bid for re-election. But how could he win over someone who didn't agree with him on anything? The answer, he explained in his autobiography, involved borrowing a book. 'Having heard that he had in his library a certain very scarce and curious book, I wrote a note to him, expressing my desire of perusing that book, and requesting he would do me the favour of lending it to me for a few days,' Franklin wrote. To Franklin's surprise, his nemesis sent it immediately. When Franklin returned the book, he included a note expressing how much he enjoyed it.

Surprisingly, this had a profound impact on their relationship. 'When we next met in the House, he spoke to me (which he had never done before), and with great civility,' Franklin wrote. 'And he ever after manifested a readiness to serve me on all occasions, so that we became great friends, and our friendship continued to his death.'

This seemingly small act – borrowing a book – had a significant effect on Franklin's opponent and on Franklin himself. The man was so surprised

by the gesture that he began to see Franklin in a new light. He couldn't reconcile the fact that he had helped someone he disagreed with. As a result, the man's attitude towards Franklin began to change for the better.

This concept is today known as the 'Benjamin Franklin effect'. It suggests that when we ask someone for help, it's likely to make them think better of *us*. It's the flipside of the transformative effects of helping others: we can ask others to help us, which will help them feel better, too.

It's a pity, then, that most of us are bad at asking for help. We might need a crucial piece of information from a colleague, but instead of 'bothering' them, we try to figure it out ourselves, wasting time in the process. Or we might be struggling with a particular problem in class, but find ourselves not wanting to ask for help from the person next to us, or even the teacher, for fear of looking stupid.

So how can we learn to ask for help – in a way that warms people to us, rather than alienates them? Well, there are a few ways. First, we need to get over our reluctance to ask. The easiest way to do this is by simply adopting a maxim: people are more eager to help than you think. We have by now repeatedly seen how energising it can be to make others smile, to teach, and to mentor. Even so, a lot of us underestimate how willing other people are to help us. According to the academics Francis Flynn and Vanessa Bohns, people tend to underestimate the likelihood that other people will agree to help us by up to 50 per cent.

Second, frame the request in the right way. In particular, do your best to ask for help in person. Asking virtually makes everything more difficult. In a 2017 study, Bohns found that 'help-seekers assumed making a request via email would be equally as effective as making a request in person; in actuality, asking for help in-person was approximately thirty-four times more effective'.

Finally, make sure you're using the right language. Avoid using negative phrases like 'I feel really bad for asking you this…' and avoid turning it into a transaction by saying things like 'If you help me, I'll do this for you.' Instead, emphasise the positive reasons for why you're going to that specific person for advice: 'I saw your work on X, Y, Z and it really had an impact on me. I would love to hear how you did A, B, C.' By emphasising

the positive aspects of the person you admire, they'll think you genuinely value their opinion – and be more likely to help you.

This last insight is key. When framed correctly, asking for help makes the person you're asking feel as good as the help makes you feel. If you want to harness the power of the Benjamin Franklin effect, you should do everything you can to ask without any sense of a quid pro quo.

OVERCOMMUNICATE

When I first launched my business, the thing I struggled with most was the need for communication. To be precise, quite how much of it was necessary.

I knew that sharing information was important, obviously. What I hadn't realised was how *much* I needed to communicate. I eventually realised – usually thanks to helpful pointers from my long-suffering team – that my fears about being too overbearing had made me not communicate enough. I wasn't giving the positive or negative feedback that most of my team members really wanted. This is a common phenomenon. We're much more likely to underestimate how much communication we need to do than overestimate it.

When you think you've communicated plenty, you almost certainly haven't.

So where most books about bringing people together focus on communication, here I want to focus on the power of *over*-communication. When you think you've communicated plenty, you almost certainly haven't. Different team members might interpret the shared information in different ways or have different levels of context or understanding. Overcommunicating means deliberately going beyond the minimum you think is necessary, and consequently ending up sharing exactly the right amount. But how?

EXPERIMENT 5:
Overcommunicate the Good

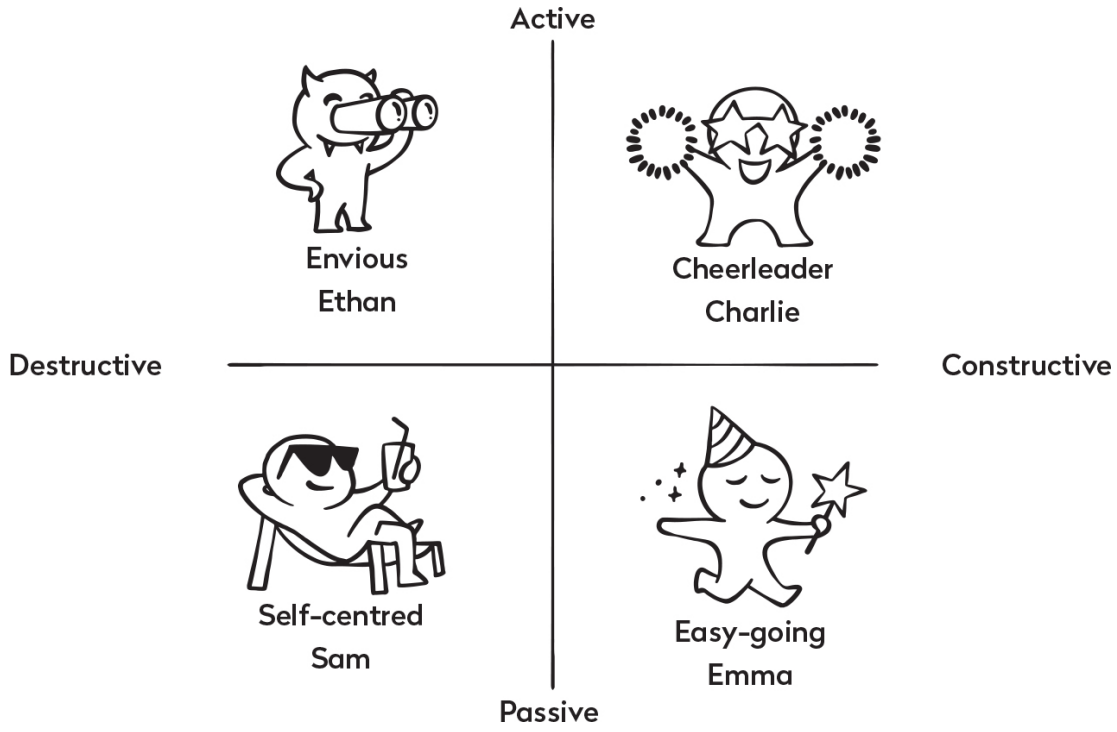
A Swedish proverb says: ‘A shared joy is a double joy; a shared sorrow is a half sorrow.’ When one person shares good news with another, both people are happy. And when one person shares something sad with another, the act of sharing takes some of the sadness away.

The first tactic for overcommunicating the good, then, is to share positive news – and to react to positive news in an energising way. This helps both the sharer and the responder. For the sharer, the simple act of sharing positive news increases positive emotions and psychological wellbeing. For the responder, expressing pride and happiness in the other person’s accomplishments fuels a positive interaction and bolsters the relationship.

In psychology, this form of self-reinforcing positive interaction is called capitalisation. One paper on the subject characterises capitalisation as involving two components. The first part involves someone (the sharer) trying to connect with someone else through a positive event and the positive emotions associated with it. For example, you might go to a friend and say, ‘Hey, I finally got that salary raise I was looking for!’ In the second part, the good-news recipient reacts in a positive way, with enthusiasm and excitement. So they might say, ‘Oh wow, that’s so great. I know you’ve been working really hard for that raise!’

Simple, perhaps. But not necessarily straightforward. Because, according to the University of California psychology professor Shelly Gable, there are myriad ways you can respond to good news – and not all of them are as positive. We can think of these as falling on two axes. First, whether your response is active or passive, and second, whether your response is constructive or destructive.

Suppose your flatmate returns home one day and tells you that they’ve been offered a job that they’ve been working hard for. Here are how these four different responses would look like:



- **Cheerleader Charlie**: An active-constructive response would be something like ‘Wow, that’s great! You’ve been working so hard for this. I knew you’d get it!’
- **Easy-going Emma**: A passive-constructive response would be some kind of understated response, like giving them a gentle nod and smiling, then saying, ‘That’s good news.’
- **Envious Ethan**: An active-destructive response would be some kind of response that undermines your flatmate’s success: ‘Oh, does that mean you’re going to be too busy to hang out in the evenings and on weekends then?’
- **Self-centred Sam**: A passive-destructive response would basically ignore your flatmate’s good news: ‘Well, you won’t believe what happened to me today.’

Gable and her colleagues found that responding to good news in an active-constructive way makes the sharer of the good news happier, and makes the relationship stronger. Indeed, in a 2006 study, researchers videotaped seventy-nine couples who were dating to examine how they discussed good news and bad news with each other. It turns out that how

participants responded to their partners' good news was the strongest predictor of how long they'd stay together and how happy they were in those relationships.

So being able to celebrate people's wins matters. And the best way to do so is to adopt an active-constructive approach to all good news.

Fortunately, this is something we can learn. The first step is to feel and show your delight and joy for the other person's good news. Try phrases like 'That's such wonderful news' and 'I couldn't be happier for you!'

Next, recall to the sharer of good news how you've actively witnessed the process that led to the good news. Perhaps you've seen how hard they've worked to prepare for that job interview, the weeks they studied for the qualifying exam, how much they wanted that outcome.

And above all, show your optimism for how this good news might shape their future (without overburdening them with high expectations). If someone's just landed a dream job, share how excited you are for the opportunities ahead of them. If someone's just quit a mundane job to start their own business, share how excited you are for them about their future adventures.

Overcommunication won't just inspire them. It will inspire you too.

At every turn, try to make your overcommunication about the good as positive and as uplifting as possible. Overcommunication won't just inspire them. It will inspire you too.

EXPERIMENT 6:
Overcommunicate the Not-So-Good

In order to really harness the feel-good effects of other people, we don't just need to communicate good news, though. We need to learn to communicate bad news too. Unfortunately, we're not always very good at that.

The problem is that we humans are just too good at lying. It's not just that we lie every day; we lie every *hour*. According to a 2002 study

conducted by University of Massachusetts psychologist Robert Feldman, 60 per cent of people lie at least once in an average ten-minute conversation.

Not all lies are created equal, of course. Most lies are trivial and told with good intentions – like telling a friend that you love his new trainers when they're not your style, or reassuring your mother that the roast chicken is absolutely *not dry*.

But there's a downside. Lying – even lying with good intentions – has a physiological effect. Lying is associated with the activation of the limbic system, the same area of the brain that initiates the fight-or-flight response. When we're honest, this area of the brain shows minimal activity; when telling a lie, it lights up like a fireworks display.

The reason for all this lying is that honesty often feels like a lose–lose situation. We lose if we're too honest because we come across like a jerk. But we also lose if we're not honest because we feel resentful about being stuck in a situation that we're not ok with. This is tricky for anyone who has adopted the maxim of overcommunication: we need to communicate the bad stuff without lying needlessly. Is there a way?

According to author and CEO coach Kim Scott, the solution is not to be honest but *candid*. In her book *Radical Candor*, Scott writes that being radically candid is about caring personally (that is, genuinely caring about the person you're speaking to) while also directly challenging the issue at hand. Being radically candid doesn't mean making the issue personal, it doesn't mean assuming you know best, and it doesn't mean saying whatever pops into your head. It does mean sharing your opinions directly, not talking badly about people behind their backs, and giving your co-workers insight into what's going on in your head.

Choosing the word 'candid' over 'honest' has some benefits. Being honest implies that you know the truth. It often has a moral connotation to it that can put people off (the memory of my school friend James insulting my card tricks with a flippant 'I'm just being honest, mate' haunts me to this day). When we say, 'Let me be honest with you,' it's almost as if we're saying, 'This is the truth, and I'm going to tell you what it is.' But when it comes to interpersonal dynamics, the truth is often unclear. Your line manager might feel like a drainer to you, but it might not be true that this

person is an objectively bad manager. For all we know, they could be a good manager for other people, or maybe they're going through something in their personal lives that's affecting them at work.

In contrast, being candid doesn't assume that we know the truth. The spirit of being candid is more like: 'Here's what I think. Can you hear me out or help me out? We can do it together.'

So how can we all learn to craft a culture of candid feedback, one that delivers negative feedback without ruining anyone's day? Well, there are a few steps to follow. First, root your analysis in objective, non-judgemental terms. 'I noticed you cut Hermione off a few times in that meeting' is much more effective than 'You are incredibly rude.' Similarly, telling people 'You are wrong' or 'You are incompetent' is going to make that person feel attacked and defensive – it's too subjective (not to mention a little rude, too). Just stick to the facts.

Second, focus on the tangible results of what's gone wrong. Again, subjectivity is your enemy. So simply highlight, factually, the consequence of what you observed. For example, 'I noticed that after you interrupted Ron in the meeting the discussion died down a bit. That's a real shame because I would have really liked to hear what other people have to say.'

Finally, turn your attention away from the problem and towards the solution. Provide alternatives of what you'd like to see happen. For example, 'Next time, please wait until people are finished speaking before sharing your thoughts' or 'Next time, maybe you could ask people questions to show that you're interested in their view but might not agree with them. I feel like asking questions might get a better reaction from them and maybe lead to collaboration.' Offering alternatives focuses the discussion on possible solutions to the problem and helps the other person avoid feeling personally criticised.

These three steps are a simple way to make overcommunication of unpleasant news a little easier. They all hint at the notion that it's possible to bring people together and make them feel good, even when you're delivering bad news. Not a lie in sight.

IN SUMMARY

- Life is more fun with friends around. That's why our third energiser is people. There are some people who naturally uplift our energy – the trick is finding them.
- That starts with becoming a team player. Try treating the people you're working with as comrades rather than competitors.
- Building connections with people is also about lending them a hand. This cuts both ways; not only do we too rarely help others, we also too rarely ask for help. So try asking: what can I do to brighten someone else's day?
- Finally, remember the most oft-forgotten truth about human interaction: when you think you've communicated too much, you probably haven't communicated enough. Is there a piece of information you're hoarding that might just make someone else's week?

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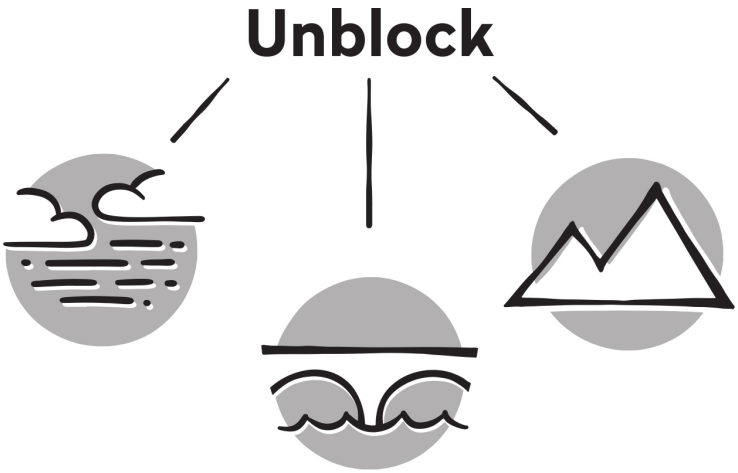
PART 2



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CHAPTER 4

SEEK CLARITY

One of the strangest videos I've ever seen is called 'How bad do you want it?' It's been viewed almost 50 million times.

The video recounts the story of a young man who goes to an unspecified 'guru' and asks for his advice on how to become rich. The next day, they agree to meet by a beach so the guru can explain the answer.

At 4am the following morning, the man arrives at the seashore. 'Walk on out in the water,' the guru tells him. The young man does. 'Walk a little further,' says the guru. The man does. 'Keep walking,' the guru says. He keeps walking, until his head is fully submerged. Suddenly, the guru is there by the young man holding his head beneath the surface. The young man struggles violently, but the old man holds him down, only releasing him when he's on the verge of drowning. As the young man gasps for air, the old man says, 'When you want to succeed as badly as you want to breathe, then you'll be successful.'

There's a lot going on in this video. Who actually is the guru (and how precisely does one get that job title)? Why is the young man so willing to walk out into the sea at said guru's request – haven't they just met? Most peculiarly of all, why are there 20,000 comments underneath the video in which people say it has completely changed their life?

These days, I find the video both surreal and somewhat depressing. But the first time I watched, I was in the throes of a bout of debilitating procrastination – and I thought it might help. When I first launched my business while working as a junior doctor, it seemed like no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't break free from the cycle of putting things off and scrambling to catch up. I wasn't alone; procrastination has plagued much greater minds than mine. Take Leonardo Da Vinci. One contemporary who

saw him painting *The Last Supper* wrote how ‘he would go for two, three or four days without touching his brush, but spending several hours a day in front of the work, his arms folded, examining and criticising the figures to himself.’

In these moments, the three energisers – play, power and people – aren’t enough. In Part 1, we explored how these three forces can help us feel good in our work and life, boosting our energy and helping us do more of what matters to us. But by themselves, they’re not the whole story. As my business grew, I realised that however much I integrated the energisers into my life, I could still come unstuck because of another P – procrastination.

When procrastination has been a problem for me, I’ve often been tempted to turn to obvious ‘hacks’ just like the one in that weird video. If you’re procrastinating, the video says, it’s because you’re not motivated enough. And if you just had enough motivation, if only you wanted to succeed as badly as you wanted to breathe, it would happen.

I call this solution to procrastination ‘the motivation method’. It’s very common. And it’s total nonsense.

The trouble with the motivation method is very simple. There are plenty of us who genuinely do *want* to do the things we struggle with. We feel like we’ve got enough motivation, but there are barriers that get in our way – time and financial constraints, family responsibilities, physical and mental health issues, among countless other things. Motivation clearly isn’t enough. And telling people to simply ‘feel more motivated’ isn’t just unhelpful, it’s potentially harmful, contributing to the sense of paralysis that caused procrastination in the first place.

So when motivation fails, where do we turn? When not obsessing over whether you truly *are* motivated, much advice turns to another principle: discipline. Put simply, discipline is when we do stuff that we don’t feel like doing. It’s the opposite of motivation; it’s taking action *despite* how unmotivated you are. If you’re trying to go for a jog, a motivated response would be: ‘I feel like going for a run, because I want to win the marathon more than I want to rest today.’ A disciplined response would be: ‘I’m going for a run regardless of how I feel about it.’ This is the Nike school of getting things done – ‘Just do it.’

I'm a little more sympathetic to the discipline method than the motivation method. Discipline can be useful. Sometimes I don't feel like going to work in the morning, but I do it anyway. Maybe that's discipline.

But this narrative is incomplete. If you're procrastinating from writing that speech you've got coming up, it might not necessarily be that you just aren't disciplined enough to prepare for it. There might be something else going on under the surface that's holding you back, and the discipline narrative doesn't care about what it is. It just makes you feel bad about yourself. In the words of psychology professor Joseph Ferrari, 'to tell the chronic procrastinator to *just do it* would be like saying to a clinically depressed person, *cheer up*.'

Motivation and discipline are useful strategies, but they're band-aids covering up deeper wounds. They might sometimes work to treat the symptoms, but they don't change the underlying condition.

So what *does* work in the age-old fight against procrastination? That's where our third approach comes in. I call it the 'unblock method'.

While the motivation method advised us to make ourselves feel like doing the thing, and the discipline method advised us to ignore how we feel and do it anyway, the unblock method encourages us to understand why we're feeling bad about work in the first place – and tackle the issue head on.

The unblock method encourages us to understand why we're feeling bad about work in the first place.

Imagine you've got a pebble in your shoe that makes running particularly painful, but you have to run over to your friend's house in time for dinner. You're torn; you want to arrive on time, but you know that embarking on the journey is going to hurt. What do you do?

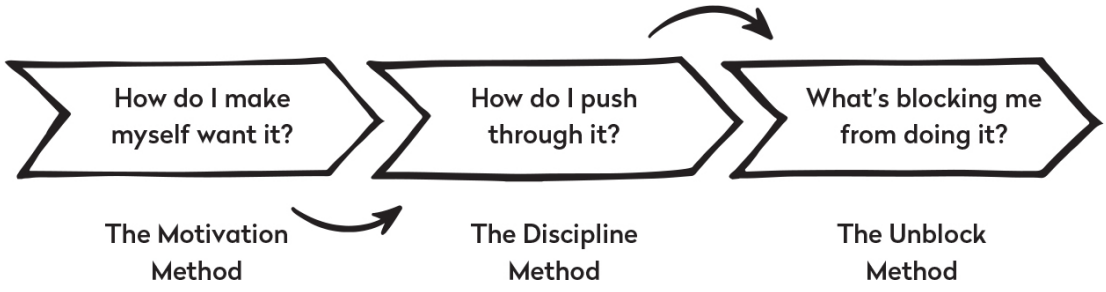
The first solution is the easiest. Do nothing. Procrastinate until the evening has been wasted. Miss your dinner and don't get invited next time.

The next solution draws upon the motivation method. That would involve convincing yourself that the dinner is going to be exciting and 'worth' the pain of running. You ignore the pain as you race towards your destination, only to collapse on the side of the road halfway there. But

you’re not worried, as you look down at your quickly swelling foot. When you’re sufficiently motivated, you’ll be able to overcome any obstacle, after all.

The third solution is the discipline method. You’ve committed to the dinner, and you’re the sort of person who keeps their word. So you run to your friend’s house, the pebble breaking the delicate skin of your sole and – lo and behold – you make it! Unfortunately, the dinner can’t go ahead because your friend has to drive you and your bloody stump to the hospital. ‘Discipline is freedom,’ you recite to yourself as you await medical attention.

I would tentatively suggest that all three solutions are off the mark. The fourth (and best) solution involves a little more critical thinking. What if you took a minute to think, ‘Why does getting to my friend’s house seem so hard?’ You’d take your shoe off, find the pebble and remove it. And then off you’d run.


How do I make myself want it?
How do I push through it?
What's blocking me from doing it?
The Motivation Method
The Discipline Method
The Unblock Method

This is the ‘unblock method’ – and it’s the focus of the next three chapters. We’ll learn that usually, procrastination is caused by negative feelings – the inverse of the feel-good energisers we encountered in Part 1. When negative feelings like confusion, fear and inertia stand in our way, we put things off. This leads to even more bad feelings, and in turn even more procrastination. It’s a negative loop of low mood and stagnation.

Fortunately, the power of all three emotional blockers can be reduced. In the pages that follow, we’ll explore how precisely these negative feelings affect us and sap our energy. And we’ll use the science of feel-good productivity to strategically overcome each of them.

The first blocker to feel-good productivity is the simplest. But it's also one of the hardest to notice. It's so common that we don't even realise it's there.

Picture yourself driving on a foggy evening. You're squinting to see the road ahead. You try to make the front lights even brighter. But the fog just isn't clearing. Eventually, you realise you need to pull over as the fog is debilitating.

This is a little like the sensation of procrastinating. Often, the reason we don't make a start is because we don't know what we're supposed to be doing in the first place – a mystifying fog has set in around us. I call it the fog of uncertainty.

This is a well-studied phenomenon; one that scientists call 'uncertainty paralysis'. It happens when we become overwhelmed by the unknowns or the complexity of a situation, leading to an inability to act. This paralysis prevents us from making progress on tasks, projects or decisions. It gets in the way of feeling good and gets in the way of getting things done.

Uncertainty makes us feel bad, and so achieve less. Humans have an innate aversion to what we don't know. We naturally prefer predictability and stability, which is what allows us to be decisive and effective. But at the same time, some of us are better at dealing with uncertainty than others. Psychologists and psychiatrists measure this using something called the 'intolerance of uncertainty inventory' (IUI). Developed by Michel Dugas and his colleagues in the 1990s, the inventory consists of a series of statements that express tolerance of uncertainty. One statement reads: 'Not knowing what will happen in advance is often unacceptable for me.' To measure how tolerant to uncertainty you are, psychologists look at the extent to which you agree with each statement and aggregate your responses to create an overall score.

The IUI offers the first hint as to how and why uncertainty drives procrastination. People with a low tolerance of uncertainty tend to view uncertain situations as threatening and anxiety-provoking, leading them to put things off – particularly on tasks involving any ambiguity. Why? Well, according to a review on the relationship between anxiety and uncertainty, there are a handful of processes that reinforce the loop between uncertainty, anxiety and paralysis.

1. We overestimate what's at stake. Someone who's already anxious will think that the uncertain event is going to be worse than it already is.
2. We become hypervigilant. Sensing that something negative might happen, our safety antennae prick up to the sign of any potential danger.
3. We stop recognising safety cues. Because we're hypervigilant to threats, we're not able to calm down when there really is no danger.
4. We become avoidant. Our brains encourage us to adopt behavioural and cognitive avoidance strategies, to get us out of there as soon as possible.

Anyone who has ever procrastinated will recognise at least some of these factors. Consider a common source of uncertainty, like choosing a career path. Suppose you're in a stable job but you're contemplating quitting for a less stable but potentially more fulfilling career. The uncertainty surrounding the less stable path might set off this process as follows:

1. **Overestimation**. You overestimate the negative consequences of choosing the 'wrong' career path, like not making enough money.
2. **Hypervigilance**. You become overly attentive to signs that could indicate the success or failure of a particular career choice, like statistics that suggest that lots of people regret changing jobs.
3. **Unrecognition**. You stop identifying the factors that would contribute to a successful outcome, like doing research on the company you're considering joining.
4. **Avoidance**. You decide to put off making this career decision completely – after all, it can't be that bad sticking it out for another year in your current job.

The result: you experience heightened emotional reactions, such as anxiety or fear – and that makes you procrastinate from making a career decision for even longer. You feel worse, and so you do less.

Most of us have experienced struggles of this kind. But the good news is that the cycle can be broken, and the fog of uncertainty eliminated.

It's a simple matter of asking a few well-placed questions. Once they're answered, the road ahead becomes much clearer.

ASK 'WHY?'

The main way uncertainty drives procrastination is by creating ambiguity over our ultimate purpose. If we don't know *why* we're embarking on any given project, it's near impossible to get on with actually doing it.

This, at least, is the conclusion that the US Army came to in 1982 – the year the US Army published an updated version of their official Field Manual (FM) 100-5, Operations. The military's main 'How to Fight' guide, the FM outlined to officials the methods most likely to bring them success on the battlefield. At its heart was a new concept: 'commander's intent'.

Commander's intent is rooted in the German military tradition, dating back to the Prussian Army of the late nineteenth century. German military strategists realised that no battle plan could ever predict the chaotic realities of war. 'No plan survives first contact with the enemy,' as Field Marshal Moltke the Elder put it. (To be precise, he said, 'No plan of operations extends with certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy's main strength.' But that's not as catchy.)

So instead of obsessing over every step their soldiers might take on the battlefield, German officers embraced the concept of *Auftragstaktik* – mission-type tactics – a philosophy that prioritised a clear sense of *why* over an excessively detailed sense of *how*. Commander's intent, as outlined in the Field Manual, consists of three crucial components – all built around the basic point of the mission:

1. The **purpose** behind the operation
2. The **end state** that the commander was aiming for
3. The **key tasks** that the commander felt should be taken to accomplish the objective

Commander’s intent suggested that the goal of generals is to answer only the highest-level ‘why’ questions: identifying the *purpose* behind the operation, and, at a push, vaguely sketching out the sort of stages that might be necessary. The troops were then given the flexibility to adapt their decisions to the changing circumstances at the front.

This approach transcends the battlefield. Understanding commander’s intent can help clear the fog of uncertainty by identifying the purpose behind what you’re doing. It sheds light on the ‘why’.

EXPERIMENT 1:
Using Commander’s Intent

How can we draw upon commander’s intent in our own lives? The first answer is illustrated by the events of 6 June 1944 in northern France, better known as D-Day.

The Allied invasion of occupied France had been intricately planned. In the first push, 133,000 troops were to land at very precise locations on Normandy’s beaches. They were to be supported by parachute regiments, who were to land at specific towns and villages, liberate them from the Nazis and secure key bridges and roads. But from zero hour, quite a lot went wrong.

Within minutes of the paratroopers hitting the ground, most of them discovered they’d landed in completely the wrong location. Over the next few hours, it would further become apparent that many regiments had inexplicably been mixed up overnight – men hadn’t landed alongside the units they knew and trusted, and were instead fighting alongside soldiers who they’d never spoken to before. It was, in the words of the strategy writer Chad Storlie, ‘a military disaster’.

And yet miraculously, within hours, D-Day got back on track. The Allies didn’t take the villages that they expected – but they did take villages that met their strategic objectives. And the troops landing on Normandy’s beaches were able to push inland as planned.

The whole saga was a victory of commander’s intent. The military generals’ detailed orders hadn’t worked. The specific plans they’d laid out went awry. But because they’d communicated their commander’s intent,

everyone involved in the operation knew the *purpose*. The ‘why’ was clear, and that made it possible to work out an alternative ‘how’.

Today, I apply this insight to my own life every day. Previously, when I embarked on a project my instinct was to immediately press ahead, planning every step – without ever really thinking about my desired end-state. But this level of obsessive planning can prove an obstacle. I would get so bogged down in ticking off specific tasks that I would lose track of what the ultimate point was. So now, before embarking on a new project, I ask myself the first commander’s intent question: ‘What is the purpose behind this?’ And I build my to-do list from there.

I’ve found that asking this simple question can have a remarkable effect. For years, I’d been failing to hit my goal of ‘six-pack abs’. Every January, I’d get excited about going to the gym. And then within a few weeks, the motivation would wane and I’d be back at square one.

When I applied the concept of commander’s intent, I realised it was because I was getting the purpose – the big ‘why’ – completely wrong. I didn’t actually want washboard abs. My real goal was to maintain a healthy and balanced physique and lifestyle. Yes, there was some aesthetic motivation – but it paled into insignificance compared to the desire to be healthy, fit and strong.

You can apply this approach to almost any question. Take learning French. Ask yourself, what’s the purpose? Are you trying to understand complex nineteenth-century realist novels? Or are you just trying to survive your upcoming visit to Paris? Next, work through what implications that has for the process. How are you going to learn the language – are you going to use Duolingo or take language classes or just watch lots of 1950s French cinema?

Similarly, let’s say you want to start a business. What’s the ultimate purpose? Are you trying to make an extra few hundred dollars a month to be able to go on holiday? Or are you aiming for a multimillion-dollar exit so you can retire early? Or are you building something you think will help people and change lives? Now think about what that means for your next steps. Do you really need to quit your job altogether, or just carve out a few

hours in the evenings? Would it be best to rush headlong into creating the business, or do you need to develop your skills first?

EXPERIMENT 2:
The Five Whys

You need to remind yourself of this big ‘why’ every day and every hour. Every email you send, every meeting you hold, every chat over a coffee – in ways small and large, they should take you a little closer to realising that ultimate purpose.

This isn’t always easy, though. Have you ever found that in the middle of a project, you get so bogged down in short-term deadlines and irritating small tasks that you lose track of your ultimate objective? As I’ve rediscovered while writing this book, you can spend months – years! – focusing on irrelevant but pressing tasks, your ultimate purpose (completing a full draft, say) being shamefully neglected.

So how can we ensure that our biggest ‘why’ is at the heart of our every choice? One suggestion comes from the production lines of early-twentieth-century Japan. In the West, Sakichi Toyoda is best known for founding the company that bears his name: Toyota. But in Japan, he has an even loftier reputation: first as the man who revolutionised the country’s textiles industry in the late nineteenth century – and second as the father of the Japanese industrial revolution.

Above all, Toyoda is famous for his obsessive focus on eliminating errors in his factories, by ensuring everyone is focused on the things that matter. Toyoda always hated misused time and resources: he first made his name for designing a hand loom that stopped automatically when a thread broke, preventing it wasting any further cloth. This emphasis on eliminating waste led him to develop a now-famous method called the ‘five whys’.

In its original form, the five whys offered a simple method to work out why something had gone wrong. Whenever there was a mistake on the production line, Toyota’s staff would ask ‘why’ five times.

Say there was a piece of broken-down machinery. Why? The first answer would lead them to the immediate cause. ‘Because there’s a piece of cloth stuck in the loom.’ The next would dig a bit deeper. Why? ‘Because

everyone was a bit tired and hadn't been paying attention.' By the fifth time, the employees would have reached the true source of the problem. 'Because the culture is terrible at the moment due to our boss being a total nightmare.'

My twist on Toyoda's method is to use the five whys not only to explain mistakes, but to determine whether a task is worth doing in the first place. Whenever somebody in my team suggests we embark on a new project, I ask 'why' five times. The first time, the answer usually relates to completing a short-term objective. But if it is really worth doing, all that why-ing should lead you back to your ultimate purpose, as laid out in your commander's intent. If it doesn't, you probably shouldn't bother.

I find this method helpful in keeping me and my team's attention on what matters. Asking 'why' repeatedly reminds us of what we should really be focusing on – and allows us to home in on it. Suddenly, those irrelevant pressing tasks seem less important. The greatest purpose – the big 'why' – comes into sharp relief.

ASK 'WHAT?'

Once you've identified your 'why', you'll need to convert it into something slightly more concrete. After all, a nebulous sense of purpose isn't enough to get a project off the ground; you also need a detailed action plan, lest you find yourself with no idea where to start.

But identifying what, in practice, you're supposed to be doing isn't always straightforward.

Take an example from the workplace. The professional relationship between Jim and his new boss, Charles, wasn't going well. No matter what Jim did, Charles saw him as lazy, unserious and unprofessional. He just couldn't seem to make a good impression.

One morning, Charles asked Jim to get him a 'rundown' of all Jim's clients. Unfortunately, Jim had no idea what a rundown was. For the rest of the day, Jim wandered around the office trying to somehow figure out what had been asked of him, without admitting it to Charles. At the end of the day, Jim had nothing. He walked into Charles's office, sat right down and

finally, completely resigned to however his boss would react, asked, ‘What’s a rundown?’

I’m recounting, of course, the plot of season 5 episode 23 of the US version of *The Office*. It’s one of the most watched of all time because it depicts the everyday horrors of the modern workplace with hilarious accuracy: micromanaging bosses, office politics, and, above all, that crushing realisation that you have absolutely no idea what the task before you involves.

This is what I mean by uncertainty over the ‘what’. Imagine you’re a student struggling to make sense of an assignment, an employee puzzling over vague instructions from your boss, or perhaps you’re trying to kickstart a personal project like learning to play the guitar but don’t know where to start. In each of these scenarios, uncertainty about what exactly you’re supposed to be doing can act as a daunting barrier to even getting started – one that saps your energy and leaves you feeling exhausted before you’ve even begun.

The solution? Turning your abstract purpose into a set of concrete goals and actions. Moving from the ‘why’ to the ‘what’.

EXPERIMENT 3:
NICE Goals

The first step in turning your purpose into a plan involves some goal-setting. You might know what your ultimate ‘why’ is; but without a clear end-goal, you’ll struggle to work out how to get there.

But goal-setting can be tricky. Of course, everyone can agree that goals are important. The trouble is, nobody can agree on what form they should take.

Back in 1981, George T. Doran, a consultant and former director of corporate planning for the Washington Water Power Company, introduced the concept of SMART goals in an issue of *Management Review*. The acronym stood for Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Relevant, Time-related – a simple and memorable formula that quickly gained traction in management and personal development circles. As the years went by, countless other acronyms joined the fray, each with its own twist on what

makes a goal effective. These included FOCUSED (Flexible, Observable, Consistent, Universal, Simple, Explicit, Directed), HARD (Heartfelt, Animated, Required, Difficult), and even BANANA (Balanced, Absurd, Not Attainable, Nutty, Ambitious) to name just a few (ok, I just made up the last one).

All these acronyms have something in common. First, they emphasise the importance of every goal being clear and quantifiable. Whether they're 'specific' or 'explicit', your goals are supposed to be easily tracked and checked. Second, they're very focused on outcomes: the function of words like 'measurable' and 'observable' is that you can tell, objectively, when you've reached the desired end-state.

So it would be a pity if it turned out that highly trackable, outcome-oriented goal-setting was ineffective. If sometimes, goals of this kind turned out to be an obstacle to productivity, rather than the key to it.

Unfortunately, that's precisely what a new wave of research seems to indicate. Studies have found that although specific, challenging goals *can* increase performance for certain types of people and tasks, they can also have unintended negative consequences.

I couldn't believe it when I first encountered this argument. I had spent years setting SMART goals. Suddenly I was being told that they weren't as useful as everyone had assured me.

NICE Goals

But the science is increasingly clear. One issue is tunnel-vision – when we become overly focused on achieving a very specific end-goal, we may lose sight of other key factors, like staying true to our values. But the bigger one is the effect they have on our motivation: if we obsess over a goal, we lose track of the intrinsic pleasure that might come from a task. In 2009,

researchers at Harvard, Northwestern, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Arizona collaborated on a paper titled ‘Goals gone wild: the systematic side effects of overprescribing goal setting’. They describe goal-setting as an addictive and corrosive process, a ‘prescription-grade medication’ that shouldn’t be thought of as a ‘benign, over-the-counter treatment for motivation’.

I’m not suggesting that all goal-setting is bad, or that SMART or SMART-adjacent goals aren’t effective. They certainly do work to motivate performance in certain types of people, and for certain tasks. But they’ve got their harmful side effects. And if you struggle with procrastination, you might benefit from an alternative approach.

My preferred method doesn’t involve fixating on an external outcome or destination, but instead emphasises the feel-good journey. It’s based on what I call NICE goals.

- **Near-term:** Near-term goals ensure that we’re concentrating on the immediate steps we need to take along our journey. They help us avoid being overwhelmed by the bigger picture. I find that a *daily* or *weekly* objective is the most helpful time horizon.
- **Input-based:** Input-based goals emphasise the process, rather than some distant, abstract end-goal. Whereas an output-based goal would home in on the end result – ‘Lose 5kg by the end of the year’, ‘Hit the bestseller list with my book’ – an input-based goal would focus on what we can do in the here and now – ‘Go for a ten-minute walk everyday’, ‘Write 100 words each morning for my novel’.
- **Controllable:** We want to focus on goals that are within our control. ‘Spend eight hours a day on my novel’ probably isn’t something you can actually do, since many external factors would have to come together for such an input to be possible. Setting a more genuinely controllable goal (like allocating twenty minutes per day to the task) is far more realistic.
- **Energising:** We’ve already discussed plenty of principles and strategies for making our projects, tasks and chores more energising. Is

there a way to integrate play, power and people into the goals you set yourself?

You might even want to use a SMART goal for your long-term objective, but a NICE goal for the here and now. Consider a few examples:

	SMART Goal	**NICE Goal**
Fitness	Lose 20 pounds within the next three months.	Exercise for 30 minutes daily, focusing on activities that are enjoyable and manageable.
Career	Get a promotion to a senior management position within two years.	Dedicate an hour each week to improving one key skill or networking with industry professionals.
Education	Complete a Master's degree in two years.	Spend 30 minutes each day reviewing course material and work on assignments in manageable chunks.

The result will be goals that boost your energy and your feel-good productivity. But which don't ruin your life if you fail to hit them.

EXPERIMENT 4:
The Crystal Ball Method

With your NICE goal in sight, you should have a clearer sense of what, specifically, you need to do – which should make it easier to get started. But before you begin your journey, you might benefit from a little troubleshooting.

Envision yourself a week from now. You've clarified what you want to do and why you're doing it. Yet, despite all this preparation, you haven't even begun. What went wrong?

I call this the 'crystal ball method', though it's sometimes also known as a 'pre-mortem'. It offers a way to identify the big obstacles to your goal *before* they have derailed your plans.

The idea is simple. By running through what *could* go wrong in your head, you dramatically reduce the likelihood that it actually will. In fact, according to an influential study by Wharton professor Deborah Mitchell, 'prospective hindsight' – the process of imagining that an event has already

occurred – increases our ability to identify why things will go right (or wrong) by 30 per cent.

For me, the crystal ball method is most powerful when you drill into a few simple questions – ones that I've taken to asking my team, and which I encourage them to ask me too.

1. Imagine it's one week later, and you haven't actually started the task you intended to. What are the top three reasons why you didn't get to it?
2. What can you do to help mitigate the risk of those top three reasons derailing you?
3. Who can you ask for help in sticking to this commitment?
4. What action can you take right now that will help increase the odds that you'll actually do the task?

This method works for almost any goal that we might struggle to attain. Because the one thing you can be certain of is that some plans won't go according to plan. So you need to plan for that too. As General Eisenhower said, 'No battle was ever won according to plan, but no battle was ever won without one.'

ASK 'WHEN?'

How often have you considered embarking on a task and thought, 'I don't know how I'd find the time'?

Time is, in the words of the philosophy writer Oliver Burkeman, 'always already running out'. For some of us more quickly than others. While we're often told that we all have the same 24 hours in a day, this obviously isn't true. There may be 24 hours in every day, but how many of those hours are within your control depends on an awful lot. A celebrity who has a chef, a driver, two full-time nannies and three personal assistants has more of their 24 hours to spend how they like. The rest of us mortals have to spend several hours each day on general life maintenance – commuting to work, being at work, commuting back, childcare, cooking, cleaning, shopping, doing the laundry.

All this means that time feels like it's in incessantly short supply. As such, questions of time management are the final step in clearing the fog of uncertainty.

So far, we've examined how to work out our overall purpose – by asking the 'why' – and identifying specific end-goals and tasks – by asking the 'what'. But there's one more question we haven't answered. If you don't know *when* you're doing something, chances are you won't do it.

If you don't know *when* you're doing something, chances are you won't do it.

On one level, asking 'when' is about accepting your limitations. If you've only got a handful of free hours in your week, and you don't use them to every possible advantage according to the dictates of 'productivity', you're not necessarily procrastinating; maybe you're just prioritising.

But when it comes to the projects that we really *do* want to commit to, we need to find some hard answers to the question of 'when'. And our first method for doing so originates in Boston University in the mid-2010s.

EXPERIMENT 5:
Implementation Intentions

In the autumn of 2015, flyers started appearing around Boston addressed to people who 'did not feel like they had enough time to exercise'. The research group responsible wanted to understand the most effective ways to get people to do more exercise.

People who responded were invited to take part in a study where they were set a goal to increase the number of steps they took each week. They were each given a Fitbit, a device that tracks health metrics like daily step count, and instructed to wear it for five weeks.

Without the participants realising, they'd already been split into two groups. The first group was just given the Fitbit with no further instructions. The second group was given the Fitbit and a series of prompts, starting with a request to explain when they would add steps to their day. Every evening from then on, they were emailed with a request to review their schedules for

the following day and identify the time slot when they could commit to the activity.

The results of this tiny intervention were transformative. By the end of the five weeks, the first group (who just got the Fitbit with no instructions) saw virtually no change from their original step count. In contrast, the second group (who got the Fitbit with specific prompts) increased their steps from an average of 7,000 per day to almost 9,000.

These little triggers to action are called ‘implementation intentions’. And the science of behaviour change indicates they can be revolutionary.

Implementation intentions have been the research focus of Peter Gollwitzer, a psychology professor at New York University. They offer a method that builds moments for your new behaviour into your daily routine, just like the cues in that Boston study. If you decide beforehand *when* you’re going to do something, you’re much more likely to do it. According to Gollwitzer, the best formula for implementation intentions is a conditional statement: ‘If X happens, then I will Y.’

If you want to practise mindfulness but aren’t sure how to fit this practice into your schedule, create a trigger: ‘When I get up for my regular midday cup of tea today, I will take five deep breaths before walking to the staff kitchen.’

If you want to turn your one-off act of eating fruit into a long-term behaviour change, create a trigger: ‘When I walk into the kitchen, I will eat an apple.’

If you want to spend more time with your family in the long term, create a trigger: ‘When I get home from work, I will call my mum.’

These little triggers can have a remarkable effect. In 2006, Gollwitzer co-wrote a meta-analysis involving more than 8,000 participants in ninety-four different studies, showing that these ‘if … then…’ prompts fundamentally alter people’s long-term behaviour. It concluded that when we intentionally set an ‘if … then…’ statement for ourselves to follow, we’re strengthening our mental representation of the situation in advance. When the trigger happens, it’s hard to overlook it. You’ve already made it part of the mental model you use to navigate a situation.

You no longer need to think about when you'll do it. You just do it.

The result is remarkable. You no longer need to think about when you'll do it. You just do it.

EXPERIMENT 6:
Time Blocking

There's an even more obvious way to find the time to do the things you value. But it's probably the most underused method there is: time blocking.

Time blocking is a fancy way of saying: 'If you want to get something done, stick it in your calendar.' But I'm not just talking about meetings; I'm talking about time for intensive work, time for admin, time to go for a run. It's pretty obvious. And yet it's the one simple tool that vast numbers of us fail to draw upon.

I'm always dazzled by the number of people I know who are highly organised, highly motivated and have clear life goals, but have made no effort to put the things they most value into their calendars. This amazes me. I've learned the hard way that if you don't put the things you want to do into your calendar, they won't happen.

I've often wondered why people are so resistant to making full use of a calendar. I guess people feel a little resistance to the idea of structuring your day to such an extent. Writing 'Go to the gym' or 'Write my novel for an hour' might seem too rigid and too structured for things we don't think of as 'work'.

But the truth is, structure gives you *more* freedom, not less. By carving out specific chunks of time for different activities, you're ensuring that you have time for everything that's important to you: work, hobbies, relaxation, relationships. You're not just reacting to whatever comes up or gets thrown at you during the day. Instead, you're designing your life according to your priorities.

Think of time blocking as a budget for your time. Just like you allocate your income to different categories like rent, groceries, entertainment and

savings, you allocate your 24 hours to different activities. And just like monetary budgeting can give you financial freedom, time blocking can give you time freedom.

If you're keen to get started with time blocking, I've created a three-level system to help you do so.

Level 1 is to time-block specific tasks you've been avoiding. At this level, you start addressing those tasks that have been sitting on your to-do list for far too long. These could be anything from clearing out your email inbox, decluttering your workspace, or finally getting around to that report you've been avoiding. And allocate a specific chunk of time to these tasks in your calendar. You might block out 9am to 10am on Tuesday for clearing your email inbox. Treat this time block as you would any other appointment. When the allocated time arrives, focus solely on the task at hand.

Level 2 is time-blocking most of your day. After you've had some practice with time-blocking individual tasks, you should start your morning by creating a time-block schedule for the entire day. Imagine waking up and planning your day like this: 7–8am is for exercise, 8–9am is for breakfast and family time, 9–11am is for intense work on your most important project, 11–11:30am is for emails, and so forth.

You're essentially turning your to-do list into a schedule. By allocating specific time slots for each task, you're creating a clear plan for when and how your day's work will get done.

Finally comes level 3, time-blocking your 'ideal week'. Here, you're not just planning a single day; you're planning the entire seven days ahead of you. Ensure that all aspects of your life get the attention they deserve. Identify all the things that are important to you: work, family, hobbies, exercise, relaxation, personal development, etc. Then, carve out specific times in your week for each of them.

For instance, you might decide that every weekday from 6–7pm is dedicated to exercise, 7–8pm is family dinner time, and 8–9pm is for personal reading. Similarly, you might block out Monday and Tuesday mornings for deep work, Wednesday afternoon for team meetings, and Friday afternoon for personal development. The key is to create a balance

that works for you – your ideal week reflecting your priorities, ambitions and personal circumstances.

You might never actually stick to your ideal week; that's what I mean when I say it's 'ideal'. Inevitably, things will come up that blow you off track – and that's ok. Time blocking isn't about creating a rigid schedule that stresses you out; it's about providing structure and ensuring there's dedicated time for what matters most to you.

Once you have that, the fog of uncertainty will be that bit clearer.

IN SUMMARY

- We get procrastination wrong. All too often, we approach procrastination by treating the symptoms rather than the underlying causes. And all too often, those causes relate to our mood: when we *feel bad*, we *achieve less*. So the unblock method is about establishing what's *really* blocking your good mood – and finding a way to eliminate it.
- The first emotional barrier is the simplest: uncertainty. The solution? To gain clarity about what you're actually doing. That involves asking 'why?' and then using this to figure out your 'how'.
- Next, ask 'what?'. That means an alternative approach to goal-setting. Forget SMART goals. What you need are goals that feel NICE (near-term, input-based, controllable and energising).
- Last, ask 'when?'. If you don't know when you're going to do something, chances are you won't do it. One solution is to use implementation intentions – where your common daily habits become triggers for the things you intend to work on: for example, *if* I brush my teeth, *then* I'll stretch my hamstring.

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CHAPTER 5

FIND COURAGE

Alex Honnold clung on to the rock by the tips of his fingers.

Thousands of feet below, on the forested slopes of Yosemite Valley, his friends watched on in agony. Nothing attached him to El Capitan, the 3,000-foot rock wall that he was attempting to scale. But he couldn't go back, not now. The only option was to keep climbing.

Free Solo, the documentary depicting Honnold's record-breaking attempt to climb El Capitan without ropes, became a phenomenon when it was released in 2018. The film invites us to reflect on a question we've all asked: why do some people dare to do things that most of us would never dream of?

In this case, the answer may relate to a distinctive facet of Honnold's anatomy. He specifically has something the rest of us don't – or rather, he lacks something the rest of us have. In one scene, the documentary crew follow Alex to a doctor's office, where he gets an MRI scan. His doctor explains that one part of Alex's brain is underactive compared to those of most people, a tiny structure called the amygdala.

The amygdala is the 'threat detector', responsible for generating emotions that help us survive – emotions like fear. People who have a defect in their amygdala don't feel any fear at all, not with public speaking, not with walking out into the middle of a busy road. It explains Honnold's ability to grip on to a vertical slab of smooth rock 3,000 feet in the air without feeling flustered.

The good thing about the amygdala is that it helps us survive. If we didn't have that part of our brain urging us to avoid tigers and snakes and high-speed vehicles, the human species might not have lasted this long. The bad news is that the amygdala can also identify perceived but illusory

threats. Researchers call this the ‘amygdala hijack’. It’s what happens when the amygdala tells us to avoid and flee, even when there’s no serious threat to our safety.

The amygdala hijack underpins our second major blocker: fear. When presented with challenges that threaten our sense of safety – like meeting a group of strangers, or taking on a task that must be completed by a looming deadline, or having to pass an important exam – the amygdala interprets the task as a threat. Even if we know rationally that putting off the task will create more stress in the future, our brains are still wired to be more concerned with removing the threat in the present. The simplest way to achieve that? Do nothing.

Have you ever hesitated to apply for a job or promotion out of a fear of rejection? Or put off attending a social event where you don’t know many people? Or failed to make a start on a creative project because you worry you don’t have the skills? That’s your amygdala talking, every time.

It isn’t lack of talent or inspiration that’s holding you back. It’s fear.

Fear is another negative emotion that blocks our productivity. It impedes our feel-good hormones and clouds our thinking and problem-solving. Procrastination is natural in the face of fear.

And the solution? To find courage. To look at our fear, acknowledge it, and move past it.

Now don’t get me wrong. The goal of this chapter isn’t to magically help you ‘cure’ or ‘get over’ your anxieties and self-doubts. Unless you’re Alex Honnold, your fear may never be banished completely. But by developing the courage to face our fears and understand them, we can overcome the emotional barriers that might lead to a lifetime of procrastination. When fear places a lock on our abilities, courage holds the key.

KNOW YOUR FEAR

It took me seven years to launch my business.

I'd wanted to start a YouTube channel since 2010. But whenever I thought about shooting that first video – even when I'd blocked it in my calendar and sat down to film – I'd experience some force preventing me from taking the plunge. At first, I thought I was putting it off because of my perfectionism. I had high standards, after all. I didn't want to produce videos that totally sucked.

But looking back, I now realise I was wrong. I was a perfectionist about lots of things – exams, making friends, my magic tricks – but that didn't stop me from starting on them. Something else was holding me back: fear. The fear of failure, the fear of judgement, the fear of not being good enough. For years, the voice of fear in my head kept saying, 'There's no way this is going to work', and 'You're not good enough to make this happen, so why bother trying?' In the end, I didn't create a video until 2017.

Perhaps the main reason it took me almost a decade to overcome this fear was that I didn't understand it. I didn't have the words to explain what was stopping me filming those videos. I thought I was just being lazy, or not committed enough, and that fuelled my self-doubt and negative self-talk. But once I started to understand the role that fear was playing in my life, I was able to identify it as the primary obstacle standing between me and my ambitions.

Getting to know our fears is the first step towards overcoming them.

Knowledge is power. Getting to know our fears is the first step towards overcoming them. Handled right, it could even take less than seven years.

EXPERIMENT 1:
The Emotion Label

The first way we can get to know our fear was well demonstrated in 2016 by eighty-eight arachnophobes, several scientists and one Chilean rose-haired tarantula.

With pounding hearts and sweating palms, the group of terrified volunteers lined up to meet one of the biggest spiders on earth. One by one,

they approached the six-inch tarantula, its sprawling leg span casting an ominous shadow on the wall of its container. Until, at last, the most heart-stopping moment of all: they were asked to reach out and touch the spider with the tip of their index finger.

These individuals were not motivated by masochism. They were participants in a ground-breaking study into the science of fear. In particular, they were there to explore the mysterious power of naming our fears in helping us surmount them.

Before meeting the tarantula, the participants had been divided into several groups. Each was primed with some simple tactics by the UCLA scientist conducting the experiment. Some were told to distract themselves, or to think about the spider in a less negative way. But one group was instructed to do something more specific: to *label* their emotions as they faced the tarantula, for example, ‘I feel anxious that the disgusting tarantula will jump on me.’

At the end of the study, all groups reported feeling distressed about the experience. But some fared better than others. And the group that fared best of all were those who had put their fears into words. They were substantially more likely to get close to the spider. And they reported feeling their fears gradually subside, to be replaced by a new-found sense of control. This sensation persisted for up to a week after the initial test.

This study hints at a powerful way to see our fears for what they really are. The goal here is not to stop your amygdala from working completely (which would dramatically increase the chances of you being hit by a truck). Instead, it’s to recognise when an amygdala hijack is happening.

This technique is called ‘affective labelling’. Put simply, it’s the act of putting your feelings into words, which forces you to identify and get to know the sensations you’re experiencing. It works in two ways. First, it increases our self-awareness. By naming and acknowledging our fears, we cultivate a deeper self-awareness that helps us better understand our emotional patterns. Second, it reduces our rumination. Cyclical thoughts about our fears can make us even more convinced the fear is justified. When we label our emotions, we become better able to process and release them – and so escape the cyclical thoughts that make us put things off.

The trouble is, labelling our emotions isn't always straightforward. If you're anything like me, you might find it quite hard to even identify the fears and emotions that might be holding you back. We're very good at rationalising 'reasonable' reasons for not doing things. 'I'm not putting off starting my business because I'm *scared* of something, I just haven't found the right idea yet.' 'I'm not making progress writing my novel because of *fear*, I just haven't had the time.'

So how can we get into the habit of naming our fears – and so learning to process them? One method involves asking yourself a few questions. When you're procrastinating, say to yourself, 'What am I afraid of?' Our core vulnerabilities and insecurities are often at the heart of procrastination. To work through them, we have to first identify them.

Next, take it a step further and ask yourself, 'Where does this fear come from?' Is it a 'me' reason or a 'them' reason? 'Me' reasons are fears associated with your perception of your ability. For example, being scared that you're not good enough or not well prepared enough to start. 'Them' reasons are fears associated with how other people will react to what you do. For example, being scared that people won't like your work, or that they'll judge you for putting yourself out there. In each case, try to internally clarify what your fear is really about, and where it's coming from.

And what if you're still struggling to make sense of your fear dispassionately? One strategy I find helpful is to tell myself the experience I'm going through, but as a story about someone else. Of course I'm not scared, I tell myself. But if I were to write a fictional story about someone like me, in my position, who was procrastinating on this task because they feared something, what might *they* be scared of? What fear *might* be holding this fictional character back from starting their task?

EXPERIMENT 2:
The Identity Label

Sometimes, our fears are about something very specific: starting a project or confronting that giant tarantula. But sometimes, our fears are broader: less about specific problems, more about our wider identities. We

hand ourselves labels that make us too terrified to get started: ‘I’m not a runner.’ ‘I’m scared of maths.’ ‘I don’t like creative tasks.’

These identities can make us afraid to get started in just the same way that more specific fears can. Back in the 1960s, psychologist Howard Becker suggested that the labels society places on us profoundly affect the way we behave. At the time, Becker was focused on labels in the context of criminality: he found that people who are labelled as ‘criminal’ after a first crime are much more likely to engage in criminal behaviour again.

By the 1990s, a series of studies had demonstrated that this problem didn’t just affect criminality. Everywhere from schools to juvenile detention centres to the military, people who are given negative labels are much more likely to repeat troublesome behaviours. The labels we give ourselves, Becker showed, affect our behaviour.

Becker called his insight ‘labelling theory’, and it suggests that labels become a self-fulfilling prophecy. You’ve probably experienced this yourself. You have one bad relationship and you conclude that you just aren’t good at relationships at all. You fail one test and you label yourself an academic failure forever. You miss one deadline and label yourself a procrastinator.

The good news is that labelling can also cut the other way. Just as a negative label can amplify our fears, a positive label can overcome them.

For example, when I’m experiencing self-doubt, a favourite label for myself is ‘lifelong learner’. This label highlights my willingness to learn and grow. It also shifts my focus away from the negative aspects of procrastination, like shame and regret, and instead gives me the confidence to move forward and continue learning. A lifelong learner is constantly looking for new ways to improve themself. A lifelong learner would never get stuck in a procrastination rut for long.

You can draw upon this method yourself. When you find that you’re putting things off, look at the labels you use. Are you overidentifying with the problem? How often do you say things like, ‘I’m a chronic procrastinator’ or ‘I can’t promise I’ll get to it on time, I really procrastinate’? And what might be a more positive way to identify?

Someone who works hard? Someone who has achieved a lot before? Someone who meets their deadlines?

This sounds like a tiny change. But it isn't. Labels are not just inert tags other people place on us. They're tools that help us make sense of who we are. If we can change our labels, we can often change our behaviour.

REDUCE YOUR FEAR

By the time Peter DeLeo arrived at the Ranch House Café in Olancha, California, he was so haggard he was barely recognisable. He had been walking for nine days.

Almost two weeks had passed since his single-engine plane had crashed in the Sierra Nevada. Miraculously, all three passengers survived, but only DeLeo began looking for help. Scratched and bruised, he began to walk away from the wreckage to look for someone. Walking wasn't easy: the plane had crashed at an altitude of around 9,000 feet, and DeLeo had to hike along the snow-covered ridges of the Sierra mountains. Eventually, he spotted lights from a ridge and stumbled his way down onto the highway in the dark, flagging down a passing car.

When he arrived at the cafe, DeLeo refused medical treatment. It was more urgent to get a rescue team to search for his two passengers. He boarded a plane and led searchers back to the wreck. But it was too late – his friends were dead.

What kept DeLeo alive on his trek to find help, while his two passengers perished where they waited? This is the question that survival psychologist John Leach has spent years trying to answer. 'His two dead companions warranted no more than a passing sentence in the press,' Leach once wrote. 'Yet, one of these men had no more than superficial bruising following the crash. So why did he die? Material was there for shelter; fire could be made, water was available and he would not have starved in eleven days.'

Leach's research on how people react in disasters reveals a core truth about human nature: when we're scared, we become paralysed. During disasters, victims commonly show cognitive paralysis, which means they become unable to think, make decisions or take action.

The good news is that cognitive paralysis is something we can reduce. After all, not everyone experiences the incapacitating effects of fear. Some people – like Peter DeLeo – seem able to turn the adrenaline that makes some of us freeze into something more powerful: an ability to scale mountains, seek help, keep moving. With the right tools, we can diminish the effect that fear has on us.

EXPERIMENT 3:
The 10/10/10 Rule

The first way we can reduce the power fear holds over us is by gaining some perspective.

One of the reasons fear is so paralysing is that we tend to catastrophise. In our heads, some minor setback becomes hugely important. Every potential failure has the potential to destroy our entire lives and define us forever. Take the following:

- You get rejected by someone you like. As a result, you decide that you're not lovable and will spend your life alone.
- You don't get hired for a job. As a result, you decide that you're not employable by any company and will end up jobless and homeless.
- You fail your first driving test. As a result, you decide that you're a bad driver and will never drive again.

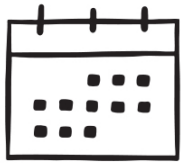
When you catch yourself catastrophising in this way, try to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. With the right toolkit, we can come to realise things aren't as bad as they seem – and so the fear becomes less intense.

The scientific name for this process is 'cognitive reappraisal': changing the interpretation of a situation so that we feel better emotionally. The main goal of cognitive reappraisal is to shift our perspective on an event, thought or feeling, allowing us to experience a more positive emotional response.

A simple way to put cognitive reappraisal into practice is to remind yourself that the thing you're feeling so bad about probably won't matter

that much in the future. You can do this by asking yourself the following three questions, which add up to what I call the 10/10/10 rule. Ask yourself:

Will this matter in 10 minutes?



Will this matter in 10 weeks?

Will this matter in 10 years?

Let's see how this would work in the previous examples.

- **Trigger**: You get rejected by someone you like. *Will this matter in 10 minutes?* I might still feel a bit down and might not want to show my face to that person. *Will this matter in 10 weeks?* Maybe, but I'll probably be less upset by then. So much could happen. *Will this matter in 10 years?* Probably not at all – I'll meet many people between now and then who could completely change my life.
- **Trigger**: You don't get hired for a job. *Will this matter in 10 minutes?* Probably. I might feel pretty low for the rest of the day. *Will this matter in 10 weeks?* Probably not, because I'm going to apply to a bunch of other jobs by then. *Will this matter in 10 years?* Definitely not. Few people become successful in their careers without any setbacks and I'll learn to see this as one small hiccup.
- **Trigger**: You fail your first driving test. *Will this matter in 10 minutes?* Maybe. I'll have to tell the news to my instructor and deal with a bit of embarrassment. *Will this matter in 10 weeks?* Probably not. I'll have booked another test and hopefully passed by then. *Will this matter in 10 years?* Definitely not. I'll probably forget all about the shame and embarrassment – it could just be a funny story, if I remember it at all.

The 10/10/10 rule helps us recognise the magnitude of the problem we're stressing out about. Usually, we discover that the failures we're worried about now aren't the ones that will always define us. And that the fears we have now won't always carry such significance.

EXPERIMENT 4:
The Confidence Equation

Fear doesn't always come in such dramatic forms as 'My life will be ruined forever', of course. Some of the fear we experience is the low, grating sense of self-doubt that stands between us and our goals – the fear that we're just not good enough.

I often think of this form of self-doubt as a kind of suspended animation. We're caught hanging between two mutually exclusive beliefs. Part of us thinks, 'I really want to do this,' but another part of us says, 'There's no way I can.' The result is paralysis.

For example, when I procrastinate writing (which is often), it's because I'm suspended between two ideals. On the one hand, there's a genuine desire to write my book – *To create something beautiful! To help people!* – and on the other, there's a little voice in my head, saying, 'Anything I write is going to be garbage anyway so there's no point in doing it!' Or, 'I'm just not a good writer, why am I even trying this?'

There are certainly some cases in which doubt is useful and warranted. I've got plenty of self-doubt about my ability to pilot a plane, or to design a rocket. But most of our doubts are usually less rational. Usually, when self-doubt causes procrastination, it's not because there's something real there. It's the result of perception: my belief in my own ability is less than the ability I believe is required. If you're into mathematical notation, you might write it like this:

Self-Confidence = Perception of Ability – Perception of Standards

If we believe our ability is higher than the standard needed, then we're confident. If we believe our ability is lower than the standard needed, then we're doubtful.

What does all this mean for reducing the effects of self-doubt? Well, with the right tools you can rebalance the confidence equation in a way that sparks action. We talked about increasing our confidence in the chapter on power, and those tips can go a long way to removing self-doubt. But even as a self-professed productivity guru, I continue to deal with procrastination

caused by self-doubt on a daily basis. In the course of writing this book, self-doubt has been the primary driver of writer's block: there have been days (even weeks!) when I've felt like I simply can't do it.

In these moments, building your confidence may not be the easiest solution. Confidence is certainly nice to have, and certainly makes starting a task easier. But if you simply want to spark yourself to stop procrastinating, you might need a simpler way out.

In my case, that often involves a simple method: not miraculously overcoming my low confidence, but transforming it into a non-issue. My favourite method is simple. Just try asking yourself: 'How confident do I actually *need* to feel to just get started with this? Could I just get started *even though* I'm feeling unconfident?' In most cases, the answer is invariably 'yes'. Of course, if I were asked to perform neurosurgery, I'd need to feel pretty confident in my abilities to get started. But realistically, for day-to-day areas where I actually experience self-doubt – going to the gym, working on my business, writing this book – I don't actually *need* to feel confident to get started with them.

Make a start. You won't need to get perfect for a long time yet.

So I can make a start, even if it's a shaky one. I don't need to feel like a Schwarzenegger-style bodybuilder to work out for an hour. I don't need my first crack at my business strategy to be a work of visionary corporate genius. And I definitely don't need the first draft of my book to be a masterpiece.

When you're trying something new, the idea that you should only begin when you feel confident to begin is a blocker all of its own. The solution? Just do it, even if you feel like you're doing it badly.

Make a start. You won't need to get perfect for a long time yet.

OVERCOME YOUR FEAR

As the glow of the stage lights began to illuminate the arena, Adele realised her palms were damp with sweat. She was about to face a sea of thousands of people. She had done this a few times before. But this time, she was

terrified. The fear of performing in front of such a massive audience threatened to engulf her completely.

Before Adele became a global icon, she was a talented artist struggling to conquer her fear of performing. It was during one of her early concerts, when the anxiety threatened to derail her career, that she stumbled upon a technique for overcoming fear that would change her life forever.

Adele took her inspiration from Beyoncé. In 2008 Beyoncé named her third studio album after her alter ego, Sasha Fierce. Beyoncé said that Sasha Fierce was a persona that she could channel on stage to become more confident, more powerful, and free from inhibitions. ‘Sasha Fierce is the fun, more sensual, more aggressive, more outspoken side and more glamorous side that comes out when I’m working and when I’m on the stage,’ she said.

Inspired by Beyoncé, Adele created her own alter ego, Sasha Carter, an amalgamation of Sasha Fierce and the legendary country singer June Carter. Sasha Carter was everything Adele aspired to be on stage: fearless, unapologetically bold, and radiating confidence. By stepping into the persona of Sasha Carter, she was able to distance herself psychologically from her fears and become the confident and powerful performer she had always dreamed of being.

Adele’s alter ego hints at the final way we can move through the paralysing effects of fear. One of the most common forces that drives our procrastination is the fear of being seen. Whether it’s giving a presentation, sharing a new video we made with strangers on the internet, or going to a party where we might not know everyone, fear of being seen or ‘found out’ for who we truly are can keep us from growing outside our comfort zone.

But what we’re afraid others will notice about us – our mistakes, small missteps, our worst qualities – aren’t typically what we notice in others. When we look at ourselves, these things seem a lot bigger and more important than they really are.

And this calls for a final way to get through the effects of fear. So far in this chapter, we’ve talked about knowing our fears and reducing their hold over us. But for the most daunting tasks, these methods might not be enough. We can’t eradicate all our fears. We need to overcome them.

That means finding a way to move from fear to courage. And it begins with changing the way that you're seen by the most important person in your life: you.

EXPERIMENT 5:
Stop Spotlighting

For me, this process began at my friend Jake's dinner party.

It was a lively Saturday evening at Jake's house, and the room was buzzing with laughter and lively conversation. Jake had been planning the party for weeks. It was a big deal. Everyone around the table knew that he lived off Uber Eats day to day. Cooking up a buffet of delicious food for his friends was unprecedented.

Therein lay an opportunity for a hilarious joke, I thought. As Jake dished up, I waited eagerly for a lull in the conversation – and as he piled the glorious dishes on the dining table I spotted my chance. 'Thanks for ordering all this delicious food on Uber Eats, Jake,' I said.

There was a moment's silence. And then a lot more silence. Nobody laughed. Then, some clinks of forks and knives against plates. My face flushed red and I suddenly felt hot. That hadn't gone well. It wasn't funny, and even worse, I'd probably offended my host who had been slaving away in the kitchen for hours.

Later in the evening, still paralysed by embarrassment, I had a mild freakout to my friend Katherine. Had I utterly humiliated myself? Had I alienated all of my friends in one fell swoop? Would nobody invite me to dinner *ever again?* She looked at me with surprise. She hadn't even realised I'd told a joke. 'I was busy helping myself to the food,' she said. 'His cooking is surprisingly good, isn't it?'

My imaginary faux pas taught me a powerful lesson. I'd overestimated the degree to which others noticed and judged my actions. As the night continued, I looked around the room and realised that the world wasn't focused on my every move. Everyone was far too busy attending to their own concerns, laughter and conversation.

I'd fallen prey to an interesting phenomenon known as the 'spotlight effect'. We're highly attuned to what others think of us. This makes sense –

as social creatures, our amygdala is always on the hunt for threats to our status. But this means that we spend our lives believing a spotlight is always trained on us, and that everyone around is constantly looking at us, analysing our behaviours, and passing judgement on our worth as human beings.

In a series of papers published in the early 2000s, psychology professor Thomas Gilovich and his co-authors proved, time and again, that individuals have a remarkable tendency to overestimate the degree to which others are thinking about or judging them. ‘People are often anxious about how the tiniest details of their actions and appearance are likely to come across to others,’ he writes. ‘Some of this anxiety may be misplaced. Many of the details of our appearance or performance are likely to be lost on the audience whose opinions we so assiduously court.’

The truth is, everyone is concerned mostly about themselves, and how *they’re* coming across. They’re not spending much time (if any) thinking about us.

What this suggests is that the spotlight effect can be reduced with a simple reminder that, well, no one cares. And when fear is holding you back from doing something, this can be profoundly liberating.

- *No one cares* if my first few YouTube videos are terrible and cringey.
- *No one cares* if I write blog posts that are a bit rambly because I haven’t had much experience of writing.
- *No one cares* if I show up to this salsa dancing class as a total beginner without a partner.
- *No one cares* if my belt doesn’t match my shoes when I attend this party.

The mindset of ‘no one cares’ can be totally transformative. It’s one of the simplest methods I’ve identified to reduce my anxiety-related procrastination.

This isn’t a magic bullet, mind. Dealing with fear is a lifelong endeavour, and I don’t expect that after reading this book your fear of what other people will think of you and your work will disappear completely.

But there’s a healthy level of fear. And then there’s a level that paralyses us. Understanding the spotlight effect means you can just make a start, right now. Nobody cares if it’s rubbish apart from you.

EXPERIMENT 6:
The Batman Effect

Sometimes, remembering that no one cares isn’t enough to overcome our fears of public humiliation. When Adele stepped out into that arena she was probably freaking out because, frankly, quite a lot of people did care.

In these moments, we can take a leaf out of Sasha Carter’s book. Adele’s method of stepping into an alter ego can be a powerful tool for overcoming fear. There’s even a fun scientific name for it: the ‘Batman effect’.

The Batman effect was first identified by a team of researchers led by Professor Rachel White at the University of Pennsylvania. White and her team were curious about whether adopting an alter ego could improve a child’s approach to a task. They designed a study that involved a group of kids aged four to six years old. The children were given a task that required them to concentrate and resist the temptation to engage in a more enjoyable activity nearby.

The children were divided into three groups. One group was given no specific instructions. The second group was asked to reflect on their own feelings and thoughts. And the third group was asked to think of themselves as a superhero, or another character they admired, like Batman or Dora the Explorer. The children were then monitored as they attempted to complete the task.

These researchers chanced upon an intriguing insight. The children who were asked to imagine themselves as superheroes or other characters exhibited significantly better self-control, focus and perseverance than those in the other two groups.

This finding highlights the potential of the Batman effect as a tool for overcoming our fears of failure – and in turn overcoming our procrastination. When we embody the traits of a fearless, confident alter

ego, we can tap into a reservoir of courage and determination that we might not feel our regular selves possess.

I've been using the Batman effect to overcome my own insecurity for years. I find it particularly handy when it comes to speaking in public. Often, I'm plagued with insecurity and self-doubt, and even though I've been delivering classes and presentations for years, I sometimes feel the fear associated with putting myself out there. In this context, my alter-ego is young Charles Xavier (aka Professor X) from the *X-Men* series, played by James McAvoy.

My physical trigger for stepping into the identity of Charles Xavier is when I put on my fake glasses. That's why I still wear glasses in many public settings even though I've had laser eye surgery: they help me adopt a professional, intellectual alter ego that I need to overcome the imposter syndrome I often have when giving a speech.

You need not be as avid an *X-Men* fan to use this method for your own fears. Think of something you've been putting off due to self-doubt: taking up a new hobby, or perhaps launching a side hustle. Now, identify an alter ego who would have no trouble with it. Who embodies the qualities you want to have, qualities like confidence, bravery, determination, or even (dare I say) discipline?

Next, step into your alter ego. Find a quiet space where you can be alone and take a few moments to visualise yourself transforming into the alternative 'you'. Imagine yourself adopting their posture, voice and mindset. The more you practise, the easier it will become to channel the Batman effect when you need to overcome fear or procrastination.

And finally, I find it helpful to create a mantra or affirmation: a short, empowering phrase that represents your alter ego's mindset. Repeat this mantra to yourself when you need a boost of courage or motivation.

I am confident.

I am fearless.

I am unstoppable.

These mantras might sound cheesy. But they're remarkably effective. They remind us that we (or our alter egos) have reserves of strength that we can barely imagine.

IN SUMMARY

- Our second emotional blocker is even thornier: fear. If you've ever put off applying for a daunting job or asking someone you like on a date, you've encountered this particular monster. The solution isn't to get rid of fear, though – instead, it's to develop the courage to face up to it.
- That courage comes from three sources. The first is to *understand* your fear. Ask yourself: why have I not started on that task or project yet? What am I afraid of? Where does this fear come from?
- The second is to *reduce* your fear. Our fears are often blown out of proportion. Ask yourself these questions to prevent yourself from catastrophising: will this matter in 10 minutes? Will this matter in 10 weeks? Will this matter in 10 years?
- The third is to *overcome* your fear. If you're scared of what other people think, remind yourself that most people are not, in fact, thinking about you. We're a self-conscious species, but we're not usually a judgemental one.

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CHAPTER 6

GET STARTED

In 1684, Isaac Newton embarked upon his most ambitious work yet. Over the next eighteen months, he would work through the night, often foregoing sleep and food, to complete his magnum opus: *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*.

When the *Principia* was published in July 1687, it represented the first scientific attempt to explain how objects move through space. At its heart was a simple observation, pithily summarised in Newton's First Law of Motion, often called the law of inertia: 'An object at rest stays at rest, while an object in motion stays in motion, unless acted on by an external imbalanced force.'

In other words, if an object is still, it will remain still; if an object is moving, it will continue moving, unless another force (like gravity, or air resistance) prevents it from doing so.

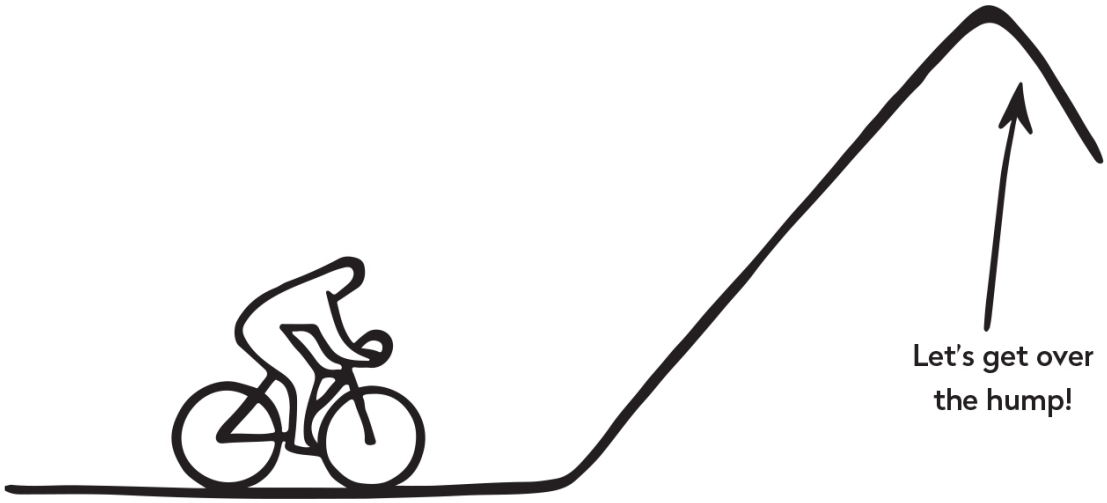
By the time Newton died four decades later, many of his contemporaries realised that the *Principia* was a masterpiece, the greatest ever attempt to describe the physical properties of the natural universe. But what they probably didn't realise is that Newton's First Law describes one of the core curiosities of human behaviour too. Because here's the thing: the law of inertia applies just as much to productivity as to physics.

So far, we've encountered two major blockers that make us feel worse and procrastinate more: uncertainty, which makes us confused about what we need to do to get started; and fear, which makes us so anxious that we don't feel we can begin. But our third and final blocker is perhaps the trickiest of all: inertia.

As Newton recognised, it takes way more energy to get started than it does to keep going. When you're doing nothing, it's easy to carry on doing

nothing. And when you're working, it's much easier to carry on working. When you feel like you've tried everything to properly motivate yourself but you're still procrastinating, you need one final boost to get started.

Inertia flattens our emotional landscape; it makes us feel helpless and stuck, and saps our feel-good emotions. But it can be overcome. I like to think of the principle of inertia as a literal hump on a road. Imagine you're about to cycle down a hill. You've got your helmet on, your gears are well oiled, and you're itching to get started. There's just one problem. You need to cycle uphill a little before you get to the long slope down. It's going to take a burst of energy to get over the hump, and exerting that energy might not be the most pleasant thing in the world.



But once you've overcome it, you'll be cycling downhill, the wind in your hair, feeling better than ever and gliding on home.

REDUCE FRICTION

So how can we get over this hump? The first method involves looking at the world around us and trying to work out what's making it so difficult to get started. You might find that some little tweaks to your environment make all the difference. To see what I mean we can turn to the work of Marlijn Huitink, a researcher who led a Dutch study into the psychology of vegetable shopping.

Huitink and her team had been tasked by a supermarket chain and several public organisations to come up with cheap ways to improve population health. To do so, they developed a simple method to explore how our environment affects our shopping decisions. On some days of the week (treatment days), the researchers added a green inlay in the shopping trolleys that covered half of the bottom of a trolley. The green inlay indicated a space where shoppers would place their vegetables. The inlay also had a message printed on it, informing them about what other people in the supermarket do when it comes to buying vegetables. One message read: 'The three most popular vegetables in this supermarket are cucumber, avocado and bell pepper.' Another read: 'Most customers pick at least seven vegetables.' On other days of the week (control days), the researchers removed the green inlays.

The researchers wanted to test whether these subtle – and crucially, cheap – tweaks in our environment (like the green inlay and the message in the shopping trolley) would change shoppers' behaviour. And indeed they did. On the days with the green inlays, shoppers on average included over 50 per cent more vegetables than those without.

We can think of these changes as reducing the amount of energy it takes to get started on a task. They eliminate the friction that stands between us and the goal we seek. If you're constantly being reminded to buy veg, it takes much less energy to remember to do so. And if you've been told which are the most popular vegetables in your community, it takes much less energy to decide which ones to choose.

EXPERIMENT 1:
Reduce Environmental Friction

The first way these frictions slow us down is in our physical environment. Even when we know we really should do something, we often find ourselves in places that make it needlessly difficult to get started.

Back in 2018, when working full-time as a doctor, I struggled to make practising the guitar in the evenings a habit. I'd occasionally think, 'I should probably do some guitar practice.' But I'd always end up procrastinating instead. I'd sit in the living room on the couch scrolling

social media on my phone or watching TV. My guitar was hidden away behind my bookshelf in the corner of the room to the point that I almost never saw it. It was only when I read James Clear's book *Atomic Habits* that I realised the obvious solution: put the guitar in the middle of the living room. Suddenly, picking up the guitar became dramatically easier.

We can think of actions like this one – or of the Dutch shopping study – as engineering our environment. The objective: reducing the friction – and so making it easier to get started.

In particular, this involves focusing on what behavioural scientists call our *default choices*. This is the automatic outcome if you don't make a choice actively. In the case of those Dutch shoppers, the green inlay dedicated to fresh produce made vegetables the default: it required no real thought to load up a cart with fresh produce.

What does this look like in practice? Well, the trick is to tweak your environment to make the thing you want to make a start on the most obvious, default decision. And, in turn, to make the things you *don't* want to do the more difficult decision. Consider some examples:

- **Practising the guitar**: Moving your guitar stand into your living room makes it the default choice. Now the obvious decision is to pick up the instrument without thinking, whenever you need a ten-minute break.
- **Struggling to concentrate**: Keeping your study or work materials organised and visible – by, for example, having a notebook right next to your laptop – makes studying the default choice. Now the obvious decision is to start revising whenever you're at your desk.
- **Reducing phone usage**: Turning off notifications stops picking up your phone being the default choice. Now the obvious decision is no longer checking your phone.

Adjusting your environment helps tilt your actions towards the right decision, the one you actually want. Not the bad decision you take without thinking.

EXPERIMENT 2:
Reduce Emotional Friction

It’s not just your environment that makes it difficult to begin a task, of course. It is also your mood. So far in this book we’ve talked a lot about the large, often stressful emotional obstacles that prevent us getting started: ambiguity about what we’re doing, anxiety about what a task entails. But there’s an altogether more prosaic obstacle. In my home country, Britain, this is usually referred to as CBA, or ‘can’t be arsed’.

There is, to my knowledge, no equivalent phrase in American-English that captures this idea quite so pithily. Which is a pity, because it’s a very widespread sensation. I CBA to write that essay. I CBA to learn guitar. And I really, really CBA to work on my book.

CBA is the most common – and most paralysing – obstacle to getting started. But it can be easily tackled, using one of the wisest, most ancient of productivity hacks: the ‘five-minute rule’.

The five-minute rule is a simple but powerful technique that encourages you to commit to working on a task for just five minutes. The idea behind this rule is that taking the first step is often the most challenging part of any task. During those five minutes, you focus solely on the thing you’re avoiding, giving it your full attention. Once the five minutes are up, you can decide whether to continue working or to take a break.

In my experience, the five-minute rule is weirdly effective. Usually, imagining yourself doing the thing that you’re procrastinating from for only five minutes isn’t as horrible as really committing to it. Especially when, in our heads, that commitment feels like ‘doing that thing for the rest of my life’.

Around 80 per cent of the time, after those five minutes are up I keep going. Once I’ve started filling in the paperwork, nodding my head to a string quartet cover of ‘Concerning Hobbits’ from the *Lord of the Rings* soundtrack, I find that I’m starting to enjoy myself – or at least realising it’s not as bad as I’d built it up to be.

It’s crucial, however, that you don’t force yourself to carry on working, otherwise the five-minute rule would become a misnomer. So the remaining 20 per cent of the time, I genuinely do allow myself to stop after five minutes. Yes, it might mean I put off completing my tax return until another day. But hey, at least I’ve made five minutes of progress on it.

And the fact that I do allow myself to stop means that I'm not outright lying to myself. If I told myself I was only going to do something for five minutes and then felt obliged to continue, the five-minute rule would lose its magic.

TAKE ACTION

Matt Mochary's client roster reads like a *Who's Who* of Silicon Valley. Managing partners at investment firm Y Combinator and CEOs of industry giants like OpenAI flock to him for advice on how to realise their potential. The CEO of Reddit, Steve Huffman, credits Mochary with adding a billion dollars to the value of his company.

Even though I've had my own business coaches for a few years now, I've always wondered what a (I suspect ridiculously expensive) coaching session with Mochary would be like. How do you add a billion dollars to a company's value in just a few sessions? What miraculous, transformative tips does he offer in these meetings?

The answer, I assumed, was some massive, revelatory secret. So when I listened to his candid interview with my favourite podcaster Tim Ferriss, I was a bit underwhelmed. 'A lot of people ask me, "Matt, what's unique about you?"' he says. 'And I have a hard time answering the question because I think what I do is very simplistic … We're not going to leave a conversation without you having at least one, two or three actions to take.'

'Is that it?' I thought. Is coming up with 'one, two or three actions' really enough to turn around a business? And then I reflected on my own life. All too often, my difficulty making things happen is that I don't have a set of clear, simple steps to follow right now. Hence inertia. And hence procrastination.

Mochary calls his principle the 'bias to action'. He recognises that the time spent together with clients is precious (for both him and them), and merely contemplating deep thoughts without turning them into actionable steps would be a waste. We need clear, concrete steps to take, rather than distant, abstract goals. Otherwise we might do nothing at all.

This bias to action is the second way to overcome inertia. We've talked about reducing the energy it takes to get started, but now you need to take an actual first step. And to identify that, we can turn to the research of Dr Tim Pychyl.

EXPERIMENT 3:
Define the Next Action Step

Tim Pychyl knows procrastination better than anyone.

Over the course of two decades, he has published over twenty-five papers on the subject, and his Procrastination Research Group at Carleton University in Canada is arguably the world's most influential source of scientific insight into why we put things off. It has rubbed off on him. 'I don't almost ever procrastinate,' he told me, 'I'm a poster child for saying that once you learn some things about procrastination, you can reduce it if you want to.'

'So what's the trick?' I asked him. What's the one piece of advice you give to people to help them overcome procrastination? His response was surprising. Pychyl told me that whenever he finds himself procrastinating from anything, he simply asks himself, 'What's the next action step?' For instance, when he knows he's procrastinating from doing yoga, his next action step is to roll out his yoga mat and stand on it. That's it.

This approach sounds suspiciously simple, but it works. Pychyl's method is a way of turning the abstract bias to action into a concrete next step.

Think of what this might look like in a few different situations:

- If you're procrastinating from studying for an exam, your next action step is to get your textbook out and open it to the page you're going to start from.
- If you're procrastinating from going to the gym, your next action step is to change into your gym kit.
- And if you're procrastinating from writing a book, your next action step is to turn on your laptop and open Google Docs.

In every case, this method takes our eye off the intimidatingly huge long-term goal (writing a book) and focuses our minds on the more achievable one (writing the next few words). It helps calm our nerves by allowing for, as Pychyl describes, a ‘layer of self-deception’. Eventually you’ll still have to take the exam, get on the running machine, write the book. But you don’t have to worry about that now.

EXPERIMENT 4:
Track Your Progress

As one of the world’s highest selling fantasy novelists, Brandon Sanderson doesn’t seem like somebody who suffers from writer’s block. An avid reader in childhood, by the time he was in middle school he had started writing his own fantasy stories. He never really stopped. By 2003, Sanderson had written twelve novels (mostly while working the night shift at a hotel reception) before landing his first publishing deal. Since then, he’s published over sixteen novels, ten short stories, and three graphic novels.

So I was somewhat surprised to learn that Sanderson actually does suffer from writer’s block – and frequently. ‘Writer’s block for me is where I’m a few chapters in and the story’s not flowing, or I’m in the middle of the book somewhere and a chapter is just not working,’ he reflected. In these moments, the urge to stop writing becomes irrepressible.

What does he do? Well, he knows that the worst thing to do would be to stop writing and wait until he starts to feel it again – a recipe for never writing anything again. Instead, he tracks his progress. Writer’s block or not, Sanderson tracks his word count and doesn’t stop writing until he’s reached 2,000 words every day. And he keeps an eye on the word count as it creeps up from 2,000, to 4,000, to 6,000 and beyond.

A Brandon Sanderson fantasy novel can be as long as 400,000 words. And yet, by focusing on his constant progress towards his goal, Sanderson makes the journey feel easy. The result: he always releases his novels exactly when he says he will, to a loyal audience of millions of fans all around the world.

This progress-tracking can have a profound effect. In 2016, researchers combined 138 studies consisting of almost 20,000 participants to conduct a

meta-analysis of its effects. They found that tracking progress, whether through writing down progress goals (like whether you completed the training sessions you aimed to do) or writing down output goals (like your 5km time), dramatically increases your chances of actually attaining that goal.

Why? First, because tracking your progress helps you identify any areas where you may be falling behind, or where you need to make adjustments. By monitoring your progress, you can identify patterns, habits or obstacles that may be hindering your progress. In the course of writing this book, I gradually realised that I needed to adjust my deadlines: for some chapters, it was easy to hit my word-count goals, for others, much less so. Second, progress-tracking can help you celebrate your wins, large and small. For example, whenever I've hit another 8,000 words, I've allowed myself a reward: a trip to Dishoom, my favourite Indian restaurant in London.

Above all, tracking your progress provides you with tangible evidence that you're moving towards your goals. I see my word count creeping up word by word, and know that I'm ever closer to having a finished manuscript. This sense of progress has helped me keep my momentum up and made me more committed to keeping going. It's a motivation boost like none other.

Tracking your progress provides you with tangible evidence that you're moving towards your goals.

And you don't need to be writing a book for progress-tracking to work. In fact, we can track progress in every part of our lives.

If your goal is to get healthier, you can keep a workout log. Write down the type of exercise you did, how long you did it for, and any other notes about how you felt during the workout. It'll help you see how your strength and endurance are improving over time.

If you're learning a new skill, you can track your progress by keeping a learning journal to write down what you're learning, any questions you have, and any breakthroughs or 'aha' moments you experience. This will not only boost your motivation, but also help you get better insight into what you still need to learn.

And if you're revising for an exam, you can track your progress by colouring in a bar chart of how many modules you've studied, showing you how far you are on your way to finishing your revision. It offers a little reminder that however daunting the task seems, you're always moving in the right direction.

SUPPORT YOURSELF

At this point in the book, you might have noticed that lots of my advice about inertia is front-loaded. There are plenty of insights into how to fend off procrastination as you're getting started, whether by taking the first action step or reducing friction. But I've given you far fewer insights into how to fend off procrastination in the longer term.

I get it. I've spent large chunks of my life making a good start on a project, and thinking that I've overcome the inertia issue, only to lose momentum very rapidly. Exhibit A: this book. In my first two months of writing, I churned out 30,000 words. In the next twelve months, I produced only 10,000.

That's why the final way to overcome inertia relates not to getting started, but to the procrastination that sets in later on: those moments where your good progress turns into a thick quagmire of doing nothing much. In these situations, you need a different way to stay motivated.

The solution is learning to support yourself. That might sound like a vague notion. But in the context of tackling procrastination, it has a very specific meaning. Your objective is to find ways to encourage yourself as you work towards your goals. And above all, to hold yourself accountable as you go. Let's start with a simple yet remarkably effective tool: finding an accountability buddy.

EXPERIMENT 5:
Find an Accountability Buddy

The Reddit forum r/GetMotivatedBuddies has over 179,000 members, all looking to 'Find accountability partners for health and fitness, studying, work, and healthy habit building.' It connects partners to

encourage one another to go to the gym and learn guitar, revise for exams and learn to code, go to bed on time and remember to call their mothers.

All these people have noticed an intriguing feature of human motivation: that starting something alone is infinitely more difficult than starting it together. When we find a partner to hold us accountable, we're much more likely to overcome inertia.

This is, on one level, because of the energising effects of people (which we encountered in Chapter 3). People boost our feel-good emotions and make us want to get started. Life is better with friends around.

But accountability partners have a second, even more powerful effect. They weaponise our sense of *duty*. Humans are social creatures, and we're desperate not to let one another down. If you might skip a gym session when you're the only person involved, it's much harder to skip when your friend is outside your apartment early in the morning looking irately at their watch.

An accountability partnership is just a mechanism that turns this basic social fact into a formal system. You and another person mutually agree to hold each other accountable at an agreed time for an agreed task. That might involve that gym buddy knocking on your window at 6am. It might mean a friend giving you a ring at a set time to check that you genuinely are revising. Or it might entail someone coming to your house to check that you've learned that guitar piece you promised you definitely were going to spend all week practising. In every case, you're drawing on your sense of social obligation to overcome inertia.

What's the best way of setting up such an accountability partnership? I often divide the process into three stages. First, find your buddy. Ideally, this would be someone with a shared outlook – which means your friends are a good starting point. Often, though, the best buddies are strangers who share the same goal you do. When you pair up with an individual who shares your ambition to go to the gym three times a week or learn to play guitar, you won't just get someone who holds you to account – you'll get someone who understands your woes and appreciates your successes. And you might even make a new friend in the process.

Buddy duly found, next agree on what *accountability culture* you want to create. There's a very fine line between a helpfully persistent buddy and an enragingly annoying one. So you need to agree on some ground rules. What would a positive approach to accountability look like? What amount of contact are you looking for? How can they best help you? I find that the best accountability buddies meet five criteria: being *disciplined* (they must stick to what you've agreed to), *challenging* (they know what it means to help you move on to the next level), *patient* (they don't jump to conclusions or rush you into making decisions), *supportive* (they're there with words of encouragement) and *constructive* (they must know how to give you honest feedback and constructive criticism).

Finally, discuss the *accountability process* in a little more detail. How's your buddy going to hold you accountable, and vice versa? What specifically are they going to do, and when? For some, accountability might mean meeting each other once or twice a week for a check in. Or it might be a daily text check-in or video message to see how you're doing on your project. Or it might just be a monthly meeting over a coffee to see what's going well and what isn't. It matters less what they actually do – and more that they agree to do it consistently and in the agreed slots.

But done right, an accountability buddy exploits some gentle peer pressure to powerful effect. You now have somebody to share your triumphs and mourn your woes. And so you'll actually get out of bed when you said you would.

EXPERIMENT 6:
Forgive Yourself

In 2010, Carleton University psychologist Michael Wohl noticed something unsurprising about his first-year students: they loved to procrastinate.

Despite Ottawa's (probably unfair) reputation as a punishingly dull city, Wohl's undergraduates found millions of things to do in the city other than study: go to bars, join societies, post on an up-and-coming app called Twitter. For all they didn't know about psychology, they knew everything about putting off psychology.

But the procrastination itself wasn’t the problem, Wohl thought. It was the self-flagellation. Wohl realised that his students’ damaging cycle of productivity was caused by them beating themselves up. Whenever they failed to study, they would spend days telling themselves they were bad students. And this shame made them even less likely to study in the future.

Wohl decided to test a hypothesis: that beating yourself up is a bigger issue than procrastination ever could be. Immediately before the students’ midterm examinations, he asked them to rate the extent to which they forgave themselves for not studying. Might the students with high levels of self-forgiveness perform better than those who constantly dwelled on their failings?

The results were clear. Just as Wohl had guessed, students who said they were able to forgive themselves for not studying were much more productive. Self-forgiveness allowed students to let go of post-procrastination guilt and shame. They could ‘move past their maladaptive behaviour and focus on the upcoming examination without the burden of past acts’. Wohl’s article was called ‘I forgive myself, now I can study’.

Wohl had chanced upon the final way inertia derails us. When we’re failing to maintain momentum on a task, we tend to beat ourselves up. But this helps nobody. If anything, it makes things worse. The inertia drives a sense of self-loathing. And that sense of self-loathing makes us even less likely to do anything fruitful.

Is there a way to break this doom-loop? As Wohl and his colleagues found, forgiving ourselves is the escape hatch. But how? Perhaps my favourite way is a method I call Find the Win. It involves celebrating something, however small, and however unrelated to your work. I like to use the format: ‘I didn’t do X, but I did do Y.’ For example:

- ‘I didn’t go for that early-morning workout session today. But I did get an extra hour in bed and I’m feeling more refreshed than usual.’
- ‘I didn’t finish the last part of that report. But it was for a good reason. I chatted with a colleague in the staff kitchen and we had a lovely catch-up.’

- ‘I didn’t finish that job application today. But I got to spend time with my grandma instead, so that’s a win for today.’

You can focus on the small losses. Or you can celebrate the small wins.

Procrastination isn’t something we can always control. Forgiving ourselves is something we can. You can focus on the small losses. Or you can celebrate the small wins. By accepting and forgiving our inevitable tendency to procrastinate – and celebrating the little victories instead – we can begin to conquer its hold over us.

IN SUMMARY

- Our third emotional blocker is the commonest of all: inertia. When you're doing nothing, it's easy to carry on doing nothing. And when you're working, it's much easier to carry on working.
- But there are some simple ways to battle through. Look for the frictions in your life: what obstacles are preventing you making a start? And how can you get rid of them?
- The best antidote to doing nothing is simply to do *something*. You can take action by first defining your next step and then tracking your progress, so you're surrounded by tangible evidence that you're moving towards your goals.
- The final step is the kindest: creating systems that can help you support yourself long-term. Above all, cut yourself some slack and celebrate the small wins.

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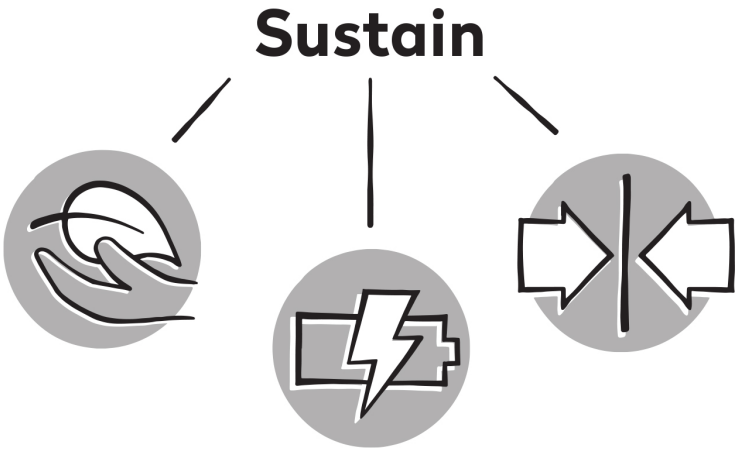
PART 3



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CHAPTER 7

CONSERVE

When people say ‘burnout’, the image that comes to mind is an investment banker working eighteen-hour days in a Manhattan tower-block, or a full-time parent juggling seven jobs to feed five hungry mouths.

So when I found myself lying face-down on my sofa on Christmas Eve 2020, telling my mum that I couldn’t work another day, I was both upset and a bit confused.

It was three years since I’d left medical school, two years since my disastrous Christmas Day shift, and a few months since I’d taken a break from medicine to focus on my business. A glorious few months that had culminated in this: me FaceTiming my mother, the night before Christmas, moaning about my life.

By this point, I was giving all my attention to my company. I had my dream job: running a small team to create something that I loved. Things should’ve been going great. But somehow, they weren’t.

Even though my business was making way more money than I would’ve ever earned as a doctor, I felt sapped. For months, it had felt harder and harder to motivate myself to keep things going. What was once super-enjoyable had started to feel like a chore. And because I’d been dragging my feet, my work had started to suffer.

What was going on? I used to love my work. Now I was drained just thinking about it.

So here I was, telling my mum about it. At first, she said exactly what I expected: ‘You should have stayed in medicine, Ali.’ (She’d used that one before.) And then she said something that I hadn’t expected at all. ‘It sounds to me like you’re going through burnout.’

My first thought was: ‘Surely not.’ I was familiar with the idea of burnout, obviously. But I’d never thought that the word would apply to me. I wasn’t working desperately hard to make ends meet. I wasn’t even doing anything particularly intense. What right did I have to feel burned out?

But over the next few minutes, I listened as my mum (a psychiatrist) explained that burnout isn’t just a thing that happens to overworked people in stressful jobs. It can happen to anyone when work stops feeling meaningful, enjoyable or manageable. When you’re burned out, you feel overwhelmed and undermotivated. You feel like you can’t keep up the pace, no matter how hard you try.

After hanging up, I decided to take her advice for once and find out more. The previous year, I discovered, the World Health Organization (WHO) had redefined burnout. Burnout was not just a stress syndrome bound up with working yourself too hard. It was much more everyday than that. According to the WHO definition, burnout is an ‘occupational phenomenon’, characterised by ‘feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and reduced professional efficacy’. And crucially, it isn’t related to the number of hours you’re working – it’s about how you *feel*.

In time, this would lead me to an epiphany about productivity. For a couple of years, I’d been mindful of the importance of having a good time in getting things done. Since my first months as a doctor, I’d known about the feel-good effects of the three Ps: play, power and people. And in the years since launching my business, I’d gotten better at ‘unblocking’ myself – overcoming the uncertainty, fear and inertia that had once made me a chronic procrastinator.

But now I realised there was something missing. Because the more fun I built into my day, the more I was taking on. And the more I took on, the closer I got to the final great obstacle to true productivity: burnout. If I couldn’t find a way to make my work and my life last, then all my research into the secrets of feel-good productivity would be for nothing. I’d mastered the basics of productivity – but I hadn’t yet mastered *sustainable* productivity.

So I started reading. And the more I read, the more I realised that there are three common forces that make us feel worse and in turn lead us to burnout. They're easy to confuse with one another. But they're fundamentally different.

First up, there are the burnouts that come about from simply taking on too much work. Your mood is suffering because you're packing too much into each day. I call these *overexertion burnouts*.

Next, there are burnouts that relate to a misguided approach to rest. Your mood is suffering because you haven't given yourself the deeper periods of time off that you need – not just little breaks throughout the day, but the longer breaks that recharge the energy of your mind, body, and spirit. I call these *depletion burnouts*.

Finally, there are burnouts that relate to doing the wrong stuff. Your mood is suffering because of the weeks, years or decades when you've put all your efforts into something that doesn't bring you joy or meaning, and it has worn you down. You've been using your energy in the wrong way. I call these *misalignment burnouts*.

In the days after that FaceTime with my mum, I started to realise that I was suffering from a little of all three. I was doing too much. I wasn't resting properly. And many of the things I was doing for my business weren't bringing me meaning anymore. In every case, my mood was suffering – and so was my productivity.

But a few days after that, I realised something more heartening: that each of these problems was solvable.

OVEREXERTION BURNOUTS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

I chose to start by focusing on my sense of overexertion. I realised that for some time, I'd been taking too much on. At first, I wasn't sure what to do about this: I couldn't just give up on my business, after all. But then I caught a glimpse of the solution.

Shortly after that meltdown to my mum, I found myself listening to an interview between Tim Ferriss and world-renowned basketball player LeBron James. I'd never been much of a basketball fan, but I soon found myself in a research rabbit hole watching clips of the LA Lakers on

YouTube. As I learned more, I chanced upon a fascinating insight: that it's almost like there are two versions of LeBron James.

First, there's LeBron the sprinter. The man who can gain possession of the ball at one end of a basketball court and, before you can blink, be standing beside his opponent's net. The man who can run at 17 miles an hour. The man who's one of the fastest NBA players in history.

And then there's LeBron the walker. The man who lackadaisically wanders the court when he isn't in possession of the ball. And the man who sees no need to run when he does get it. Why would he, when he'll routinely hit the basket with shots from over 10 metres away?

Many commentators thought this contrast explained LeBron's frankly weird longevity. LeBron had dominated the NBA since the mid-2000s. In a field where athletes at their prime play for an average of four-and-a-half years, and an average of fifty games in their seasons, LeBron's been playing an average of over seventy games per season for nineteen years.

How was he able to sustain his position over a multi-decade career? The answer, it seems, relates to all that walking.

Sports analysts have trawled through reams of on- and off-court data for LeBron and other NBA players, and spotted the same thing. Although he's a man who can sprint at the speed of a car coursing through the suburbs, LeBron is on average one of the slowest players in the NBA. In the 2018 season, his average speed during games was 3.85 miles per hour (more or less walking speed); he ranked in the bottom ten of all players who played for at least twenty minutes per game. During the regular season, he spent 74.4 per cent of time on the court walking, a time unmatched by almost anyone else in the league.

Unexpectedly, LeBron James offered me my first hint as to how to overcome my sense of fatigue. Overexertion burnouts, I realised, come from the negative emotions that arise when we do too much, too fast. We accept more work than we can do, and fail to take the breaks in our working day that we require. We sprint all the time.

Do less, so that you can unlock more.

The solution? Follow LeBron's lead. Conserve your energy. Do less, so that you can unlock more.

DO LESS

In 1997, there was only one thing anybody wanted to ask Steve Jobs: what happened to OpenDoc? Over the previous five years, Apple engineers had worked hard on the software platform, which they thought would revolutionise the way users created, shared and stored their files. And then Jobs returned as Apple's CEO, and cut the program almost immediately.

At the time, many thought that Jobs had made a historic blunder. But he justified it in straightforward terms. 'People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on,' he said. 'But that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are … Innovation is saying no to 1,000 things.'

Jobs' message was clear: *no* was just as important as *yes*. 'I'm actually as proud of the things we haven't done as the things I have done,' Jobs said.

It was the right call. Over the next decade, Apple would go from strength to strength – becoming, by the time of his death in 2011, the most valuable publicly traded company in the world.

This lesson is important for the rest of us too. Do any of the following sound familiar?

- A friend asks you if you want to go for dinner next week. You have a big deadline that day, but you're sure you'll be finished by then. The day in question rolls around, and you're miles behind on your work – you can't possibly go.
- A colleague tries to schedule a boring meeting in a few months' time. You definitely wouldn't have time now – but by then you certainly will, right? Until, that is, the meeting is suddenly tomorrow – and it completely derails all of your other obligations.
- A friend asks you if you want to play your favourite video game right now. You're working on a massive task that you know will take weeks – but the deadline isn't for months. Naturally, you find yourself

playing World of Warcraft for six hours. Eight weeks later, you've missed your deadline.

In all of these cases, we're suffering from a simple problem – overcommitment. It is the first way we set ourselves on the path to overexertion: we say yes to things in the present, but in the long term, they're going to grind us down.

It's easy to see why. Overcommitting is simply too easy. But that doesn't mean it can't be resisted.

EXPERIMENT 1:
The Energy Investment Portfolio

The first step to resisting overcommitment is to get a clear sense of where your energy is actually going. Before you can start saying 'no', you need to work out what you want to say 'yes' to.

The idea of the 'energy investment portfolio' is simple. You simply come up with two lists. List A is a list of all your dreams, hopes and ambitions. These are things you would like to do at some point, just probably not right now. List B is a list of your active investments. These are the projects you're actively investing energy into right now (or want to be). And by right now, I mean this week.

Here's what my energy investment portfolio looks like:

Dreams, Hopes, Ambitions	**Active Investments**
Learn Mandarin Chinese	Build muscle
Learn to ride a motorbike	Learn to cook
Take up archery	Play more squash
Make a road trip across USA in a van	Organise a Portugal holiday
Organise a glamping retreat	
Go on a wakeboarding trip	
Try acroyoga	
Learn to surf	
Go on a scuba diving trip to Bali	

Dreams, Hopes, Ambitions	Active Investments
Live like a digital nomad	
Get 6-pack abs	

The dreams list can be as long as you like – you're only limited by your imagination. My active investments list is a selection of personal projects that I'm currently working on. I like the terminology of investments because I'm *investing* energy into the project, and the return is (hopefully) the value it brings to me.

The active investments list should be limited based on how much time and energy you've got to invest in them. This will differ from person to person. I like to limit mine to around five but if you've got young kids or a hectic career, you might be ok with three active investments. Or two, or one. In every case, though, it's wise to keep your active investments in the single digits.

If you want to move a dream into your active investments list, you need to make sure you've got the time and energy to invest in it. When you've got a large degree of choice in what you could be doing with your time, it makes it a lot harder to commit to something in a given time slot. Our brain is always thinking, 'I'm working on X right now, but maybe I could be working on Y, or possibly even Z.' This is risky; if you're doing a house renovation while working on a huge project at work, while also trying to learn Japanese, while also trying to get your blog off the ground, while also trying to coach your kids' football team, everything is going to feel a lot more stressful.

The energy investment portfolio is crucial in resisting the seductive logic of overcommitment. We tend to think we can do everything. It's a myth. Sustainable productivity means recognising the limitations on our time. Everybody has them.

EXPERIMENT 2:
The Power of No

A common problem is that even when we know the importance of saying 'no', it can be hard to actually say it. How can we force ourselves to

reject the offers that we don't realistically have time for?

My favourite idea comes from the writer and musician Derek Sivers, which he calls 'hell yeah or no'. His advice is as follows: when you find yourself weighing up whether to take on a new project or commitment, you've got two options – either 'hell yeah' or 'no'. There's no in between.

With this filter, you start finding that 95 per cent of commitments are ones you should reject. Rarely are things a 'hell yeah'. They're usually along the lines of 'This could conceivably be useful or semi-interesting, so yeah, why not?' These are justifications from your brain that you need to overrule. Think about how much you have on already. If it isn't a 'hell yeah', it's not worth doing.

If it isn't a 'hell yeah', it's not worth doing.

A second method is even simpler and involves a little reframing. It involves thinking in what economists would call *opportunity costs*. Opportunity costs reflect the fact that every 'yes' we say is a 'no' to whatever else we could've been doing with that time and energy instead.

Suppose a co-worker asks you to take on some extra projects. If your goal is to get a promotion or raise, and helping out on extra projects is a way to get there, then you might be more inclined to say 'yes'. But that doesn't account for everything else you could be doing. Remind yourself what you're saying 'no' to. Playing in the park with your kids? Catching up with a friend that you haven't seen for ages? A good night's sleep?

Finally, there's a method that comes from Juliet Funt, one of the world's leading experts on the power of no. An adviser to CEOs and leaders of Fortune 500 companies, Funt is the author of *A Minute to Think*, a book about how giving yourself thinking space might be the secret to sustainable productivity. When I interviewed her for this book, I asked her what the most practical, actionable takeaway was from her research. She told me about a powerful concept: the 'six-week trap'. The trap is when you look at your calendar six weeks from now, see all the blank space and think, 'I could totally say yes to this.' As the weeks count down, the space that was empty six weeks ago starts to look more and more full. By the time the day itself comes around, you've realised you really shouldn't have said yes to

the commitment – but you've done it now and you don't want to disappoint people by reneging.

Her solution is to ask yourself a simple question. Every time you're presented with a request for a few weeks' time, think: 'Would I be excited about this commitment if it was happening tomorrow? Or am I only thinking about saying "yes" to it because it's easier to make it a problem for my future self?'

It's so tempting to think, 'Six weeks from now, my schedule is going to be totally clear, so I'll definitely have time and energy to do this thing'. You won't. In six weeks, your life is going to be just as busy as it is today. If you wouldn't say yes to something happening tomorrow, you shouldn't say yes to it in a month or more.

RESIST DISTRACTION

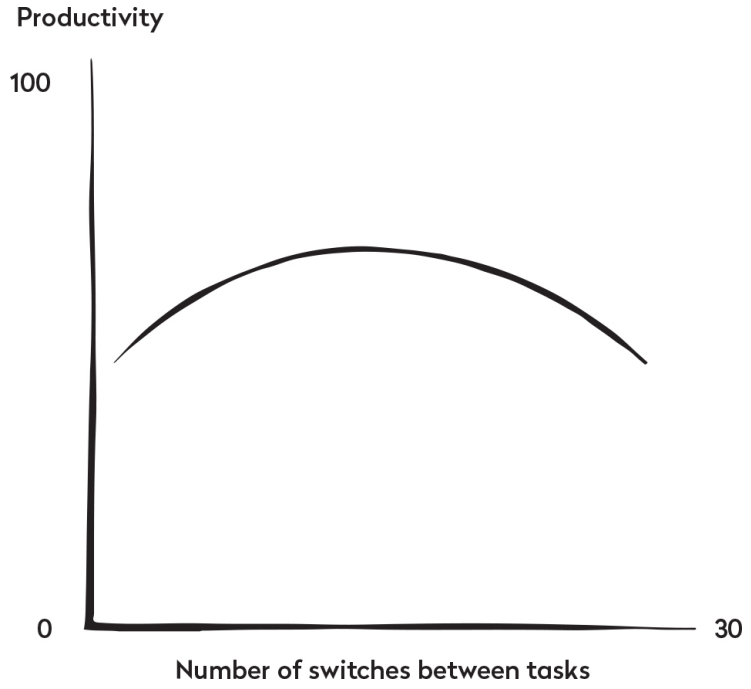
Our next strategy for energy conservation relies on two insights. The first is obvious: that humans are bad at multitasking. The second less so: that we're not bad at it in quite the way you think.

I learned this from a study undertaken by the computer scientists Rachel Adler and Raquel Benbunan-Fich in 2012. The duo developed an experiment in which people had to switch between six tasks: a Sudoku puzzle, a challenge that involved unscrambling some letters into a word, some 'odd-one-out' visual problems and so on. Next, they gathered a bunch of people and split them into two groups. In the no-multitasking group, the participants had to do each of the tasks in sequence. This means they had to finish the Sudoku task before moving to the unscrambling word task. In the multitasking group, different tabs were open for each of the six tasks and participants were told they could click between the tabs to switch between tasks.

The outcome was surprising. Of course, the people who were massively distracted – those who were incessantly switching from task to task – performed badly. But it wasn't the least distracted volunteers – those who focused solely on one task at a time – who performed best. When the researchers plotted a graph of 'productivity' on the vertical axis against the

number of switches between tabs on the horizontal axis, they found an upside-down U-shaped pattern. There was a healthy level of distraction in the middle – the highest performers were those who occasionally switched between tasks, but didn't go overboard.

Why does distraction have this effect? On the one hand, the erosion of our abilities when we change focus too often comes from what scientists call 'switching costs'. These are the cognitive and temporal resources expended during the transition between tasks. Think of the mental effort required to disengage from one task, reorient oneself to the new task, and then adjust to its demands. This was the problem affecting the volunteers on the right-hand side of the chart. On the other hand, when we spend too long intently focused on one task, we're also likely to burn through our cognitive resources – so our focus declines too. This was the problem affecting the volunteers on the left-hand side of the chart.



So the goal is to spend *most* of our time focused on just one task – but not beat ourselves up if we occasionally lose concentration. But how?

EXPERIMENT 3:
Add Friction

My first answer takes us back to the laws of physics. In Chapter 6, we learned about the frictions that prevent us from making a start on tasks. When you put your guitar in a distant corner of the room, you're much less likely to pick it up than when it's in front of the TV. When it comes to fending off distraction, we can invert this logic, creating obstacles that stand between you and the tasks you don't want to divert your attention. Think of it as *adding* friction.

Consider the example of the sports journalist David Lengel. In early middle age, with two young children and an all-consuming job, Lengel realised something depressing. He only got a couple of hours a night with his wife and kids – and he spent most of it on his phone. 'Is this how it all ends?' he found himself asking one evening. 'Is this what we'll do for the rest of our lives?'

His solution was to buy a Nokia. Not a modern Nokia with a touchscreen and dozens of apps. An old-school Nokia 3310, the famous 'indestructible' handset, replete with the 2D game Snake and clunky giant pixels.

The effects were dramatic. At first, he felt oddly naked – everyone else on his commute was checking Twitter, while he just sat there twiddling his thumbs. But with time, that sensation subsided. 'And then', he wrote, 'the magic started to happen.

'I watched proper TV shows without straying, I read actual books without swiping and I enjoyed more shared experiences with my wife,' Lengel recalled in a *Guardian* article about his experience. 'And as a bonus, I was able to harass her when she was browsing Instagram.' It had a transformative impact on his ability to concentrate – and to find joy in his life.

Lengel's method involved adding friction to his use of technology. But you don't need to get a brick-phone to refocus in this way. Start with the obvious. Uninstall whatever social networks you're addicted to from your phone. If you want to access them, you have to do so using the web interface. This momentary pause makes you reconsider whether you actually want to be spending time on Twitter, rather than doing so without thinking. If that isn't working, log out. That way, when you next access the

app, you'll have to log back in, which will take a whole 30 seconds; very often this alone will be enough to stop you checking your feed at all.

Next, move on to the more hardcore anti-technology methods. I get a lot of mileage out of tools that make the technology you're using painfully slow. Thanks to the ubiquity of fast internet, the speed with which we can access energy-draining distractions has increased dramatically. One way around this is to install tools that artificially increase the loading time of certain apps, so you feel like you're on a nineties dial-up modem. Every time I open up Twitter or Instagram, the app I have opens a screen that says, 'Take a deep breath', and after three seconds, gives me the option to open Twitter or Instagram.

Usually, that's all the time I need to think, 'Do I really want to be doing this right now?' Sometimes the answer is a solid yes. Mostly, the answer is: 'Definitely not, I just clicked on the app out of habit rather than because I actually wanted to use it.' And then I log off.

EXPERIMENT 4:
Correct Course

But as we've seen, distraction isn't always the end of the world. In fact, the most productive people tend to be those who get a little distracted – but don't allow it to derail their productivity. For the rest of us, this might not be so easy.

I sometimes like to use an aeronautical metaphor. Imagine you're on a flight from London to New York. You get an announcement halfway through the flight saying, 'Because of heavy winds and turbulence, we've altered our course by a few degrees.' No biggie, you think. Until the pilot carries on talking. 'Because of this, we've decided to abandon our original destination and head towards Buenos Aires instead.'

In most aspects of our lives, if things go slightly wrong we don't let ourselves get blown entirely off course. The annoying email from your colleague means the project gets slowed down by a day, but not cancelled outright. You hurt your leg running, so you need to stop exercising for a week – not forever. The heavy winds make you land five minutes later than planned, not divert to Buenos Aires.

And yet when it comes to our day-to-day working patterns, many of us get ensnared by a perverse logic – one that the blogger Nate Soares calls ‘failing with abandon’:

- ‘I’ve spent five minutes on social media; I might as well continue to do so for the next three hours.’
- ‘I missed my morning workout; I guess today is a write-off, and I’ll just binge-watch TV instead of getting anything done.’
- ‘I skipped a day of my language learning app streak, so I might as well give up on learning the language altogether.’

Failing with abandon is a common reason we waste vast amounts of energy. The key thing is getting back on course.

Again, the solution is a simple reframing. As we’ve seen, it’s not possible to completely eradicate distraction. So you need to give yourself permission to be distracted. Think of distraction as a temporary veering off-track – not an indication that it’s time to abandon your plans altogether. As long as we correct course, we’ll still end up at our intended destination.

Give yourself permission to be distracted.

To do so, it’s helpful to draw upon a concept borrowed from the world of meditation. Teachers recognise that meditating is difficult, and that the mind has a tendency to wander. So in the final minute of many guided meditations and meditation classes, they often say something like, ‘If you haven’t managed to get deep into the practice, that’s ok. Don’t worry. You can simply begin again.’ A minute of focus is better than nothing.

I often recite the mantra ‘Begin again’ when I find myself getting distracted. It’s a powerful reminder. Don’t fail with abandon. Regardless of how you’ve done – or how you *think* you’ve done – you can always return to what matters.

BREAK MORE

In 2008, psychologists James Tyler and Kathleen Burns invited sixty undergraduate students into their lab. One by one, the students were asked to turn away from the researcher and begin a draining task: stand on one leg and count down by seven from 2000 (2000, 1993, 1986, 1979…) for six minutes.

Students might have thought they were being tested on their arithmetic. In fact, Tyler and Burns were much more interested in the second part of the experiment. In the wake of their one-legged exertions, the students were randomly split into three groups. One got a one-minute break before proceeding to the next task; another got a three-minute break; and the luckiest group got a whole ten-minute break before proceeding.

The experimenters then asked the students to come back into the main laboratory. Once again, they were asked to turn around to face away from the experimenter. But this time the task was different. This time they were given a handgrip and asked to squeeze it with their non-dominant hand for as long as they could. As they did, an experimenter secretly timed how long they could hold on.

You might think that gripping something is purely a measure of hand strength. But that's not what the researchers found. In fact, the key determinant of hand-gripping success was the length of their breaks. There wasn't much difference between the first two groups: the one-minute group squeezed the handgrip for 34 seconds on average, the three-minute group for 43 seconds. The ten-minute group was different. On average, they squeezed the handgrip for 72 seconds. Their conclusion was simple: adding a break of just ten minutes between two tasks that require self-control seems to help combat overexertion.

Tyler and Burns's study hints at the last way to conserve our energy. So far, we've learned the importance of simply saying no and of eliminating distraction. Which misses a final ingredient. Because the truth is, within every day you need time for a break. And more time than you might imagine.

In fact, the people who seem to get the most done are often those who've turned doing nothing for large chunks of time into a fine art. In one study, the software company Draugiem Group set out to find out how much

time people spent on various tasks and how it related to each worker's productivity. The workers who were most productive were not the ones who chained themselves to their desks. Nor were they the ones who gave themselves a healthy-sounding five-minute break every hour. The most productive workers gave themselves an almost unbelievable amount of time off: a work-to-break ratio of fifty-two minutes of work to seventeen minutes of rest.

So the last step to conserve your energy is even simpler than the first two: find moments in your working day to do nothing. And embrace them.

EXPERIMENT 5:
Schedule Your Breaks

The first way we can embrace the redemptive power of breaking is devilishly simple: schedule time into your calendar to do nothing. And schedule more of it than you think.

Most knowledge work that we do today requires some element of what psychologists call 'self-regulatory exertions'. This is our ability to control our behaviour, thoughts and feelings. Writing this paragraph right now requires me to self-regulate by resisting the temptation to go and do something easier, and to focus my attention on the words on this page.

Psychologists believe that our ability to self-regulate is a limited resource that is easily depleted. The longer I sit on this chair writing this book, the harder it becomes for me to stay seated and keep writing: I've already 'used up' this resource. To conserve our energy levels during a work session, we need to find ways to replenish our energy.

When I was working in the emergency department, I remember being surprised by the emphasis placed on this point. I'll never forget being five hours into my first shift in the emergency department. The waiting room was teeming with over a hundred patients, some of whom were standing because there was no space to sit. The resuscitation bays were overrun with critically unwell patients, and we were having to see some of our patients in the middle of the corridor because every clinic room was occupied.

I was completely out of my depth. My shift had started at 8am, and it was now 1pm. I felt guilty about working so slowly compared to the others,

so I decided to skip lunch and continue working my way through the patients. But as I looked down the waiting list to see who was next in line to be seen, one of the consultants, Dr Adcock, tapped me on the shoulder.

'Ali, as far as I know, you haven't taken your break yet. Why don't you head off now and grab lunch?' Dr Adcock raised an eyebrow and tilted his head, his trademark 'delivering serious news' expression.

'Thanks, but I'm good,' I told him. 'I'm not hungry, and there are a lot of patients to see, so I'm happy to power through and I'll grab a coffee later.'

I assumed he'd pat me on the shoulder, say, 'Atta boy, that's the spirit,' and walk away with increased respect for my amazing work ethic. He didn't. Instead, he reached over my shoulder and switched off my computer monitor.

As I turned to him, slightly confused, he smiled. 'Look, I know it's your first day and I like that you're keen. But I've been in this game long enough to know that the patients are always going to keep coming. Unless you take a break, you're going to lose focus, and you might make a mistake. That's not good for anyone.'

I looked around at the chaos surrounding me. The emergency buzzer was ringing in one of the rooms across the hall. There were people on stretchers along the corridor. It was chaos.

Dr Adcock followed my gaze. 'You can't be of any use to anyone if you're exhausted, but you can make more effective decisions if you take the time to recharge and refocus,' he said. 'No one's going to die because you were having lunch. There's always time for that.'

Amid the chaos that is emergency medicine, this was the one golden rule that all senior doctors enforced. You *have* to take a break every four hours. Before working in the emergency department, I thought that this would be like how Captain Barbossa describes the 'pirate's code' in *Pirates of the Caribbean* – 'More what you'd call guidelines than actual rules.'

I was wrong. The job of a consultant was like that of an army general, managing the movement of troops on the battlefield. And a big part of that was ensuring that every doctor was taking a break every four hours, and to make sure no area was understaffed because of this rule.

I still think about that fateful lunchtime in the emergency department to this day. Every day, before starting work, I think about when I'll be feeling most overexerted and I time-block fifteen minutes out at the slots when I think I'll most need it. And whenever I'm tempted to push through it, I remember the science of self-regulation – and that the harder you work, the more overexerted you become. And I remind myself of the importance of rest – even when you don't think you need it.

Breaks aren't a special treat. They're an absolute necessity.

Remember Dr Adcock. Even if you're in the business of saving lives, breaks aren't a special treat. They're an absolute necessity.

EXPERIMENT 6:
Embrace Energising Distractions

Not every small break must be scheduled into your calendar, though. Sometimes, unplanned rests can be beneficial. I call these 'energising distractions'.

I first got to thinking about the power of energising distractions when I came across the work of the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Often described as the 'father of mindfulness', Nhat Hanh never actually used the term himself. Instead he viewed his work as introducing the world to the ancient wisdom of Buddhist teaching; something he began doing after he was exiled from South Vietnam in the 1960s for refusing to support the Vietnam War.

To me, the most powerful of Nhat Hanh's ideas is the 'awakening bell'. In Nhat Hanh's Buddhist tradition, known as Plum Village after the Plum Village Monastery he founded in France in 1982, bells are used to mark the beginning of a meditation session. But they're often also sounded at random through the day. The unexpected 'ding' of the bell would cause people to stop what they were doing and realise where they were. It would encourage them to be present.

When I first encountered Nhat Hanh's teachings, it made me realise that not all distractions are created equal. Sure, some distractions stop you

achieving the thing you want to – Twitter notifications, urgent administrative emails and so on. But some distractions can bring positive energy into our lives, forcing us to pause, reflect and take things at a more reasonable pace.

Once I started thinking about some distractions as *energising* distractions, I realised I'd been using them for years – without having realised that's what they were. When I was at university, I'd decided that friends were always going to be welcome distractions from work. Instead of closing my door while studying, I'd prop it open with a doorstop, which meant that any time a friend would walk past on their way to their own room, they could stick their head in for a quick (or not-so-quick) conversation. Yes, this probably did 'waste' some energy and so reduced my effectiveness while studying. But it gave me something far more energising – quality time with friends. When I think back to my university days, I don't wish that I'd worked harder or more efficiently. I'm glad I made the time to have these serendipitous interactions with my friends.

There's a joy to some distractions. Think of them as short, sharp invitations to pause – like Nhat Hanh's awakening bell. Life isn't about maintaining focus all the time. It's about allowing space for little moments of serendipity and joy.

IN SUMMARY

- The greatest cause of burnout isn't exhaustion. It's low mood. If you can make yourself feel better, you won't just achieve more – you'll last longer, too.
- Our first kind of burnout arises from overexertion. The solution: do less.
- There are three ways to do less in practice. The first is to stop yourself from overcommitting. Limit the list of projects you're working on and get comfortable with saying 'no'. Ask yourself: if I had to pick only one project to put all my energy into, what would that be?
- The second way is to resist distraction. Ask yourself: can I uninstall social media apps on my phone so that I can access them only through my web browser? How can I correct course and restart if (or, more realistically, when) I get distracted?
- The third way is to find moments in your working day to do nothing. Ask yourself: am I treating breaks as a special event rather than a necessity? And what could I do to take more of them?

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CHAPTER 8

RECHARGE

2020 was a hard year for the lexicographers at Oxford University Press.

In addition to their main role – compiling the *Oxford English Dictionary* – every year they sit down to nominate their Word of the Year, new coinages that capture the essence of the last twelve months. For years, their nominations had made the news for capturing the global zeitgeist. 2008: credit crunch. 2013: selfie. 2015: 😂.

But 2020 was harder than ever before. As Covid spread, a panoply of new terms erupted into the lexicon: 'lockdown', 'social distancing', 'super-spreader'. In the end, the *OED* could not settle on just one word. 'Given the phenomenal breadth of language change and development during 2020,' they wrote, 'Oxford Languages concluded that this is a year which cannot be neatly accommodated in one single word.'

To me, though, the true word of the year was nestled on page six of the OED's report: 'doomscrolling'. Like most people, I spent vast chunks of my rest time in 2020 mindlessly reloading social media. 'I should be relaxing,' I found myself thinking. 'And yet instead, I seem to have ingested 2,500 tweets about the economic effects of lockdown on luxury candle makers in Vermont.'

Most of us have experienced the perils of doomscrolling. After a long day of work, you settle into your favourite spot on the couch, phone in hand, ready for a few minutes of relaxation. Yet, instead of the peaceful break you planned, you get sucked into an endless vortex of negativity, consuming one distressing story, tweet or video after another. The first victim: our mood. We think we're resting, but it doesn't feel like it at all.

In the last chapter, we talked about the tendency to burn ourselves out through overexertion, bringing down our mood by doing too much and not

taking enough breaks at work. The solution, we learned, was to conserve our energy more effectively. But we can also burn ourselves out in our time *away* from work. Doomscrolling, binge-watching TV shows, mindlessly checking emails or WhatsApp notifications – these are the ways we sabotage our feel-good emotions during our downtime.

The resulting stresses contribute to what I call depletion burnout. It comes from not giving yourself enough time or space to truly rejuvenate.

Try this simple experiment. Set a timer for five minutes and make two lists. The first is a list of things you tend to do when you're feeling drained of energy. The second is a list of things that tend to actually recharge that energy. If you're anything like me, you might find that the two lists look very different.

Things I do when I'm feeling drained of energy	**Things I do that actually energise me**
Scroll Instagram	Go for a walk
Scroll TikTok	Play some guitar
Lie on the sofa and search endlessly for a random movie to watch on Netflix	Reach out to a friend and suggest grabbing dinner
Scroll through Twitter, feeling incensed about what's going on in the world	Do some yoga or stretching
Order an unhealthy takeaway	Head to the gym for a quick workout

This difference between what we do automatically when we're feeling drained and what would *actually* rejuvenate us shows that the ways we rest are rarely restful. And it raises a question: how can we break the doomscroll/binge-watch/takeaway cycle – and start engaging in activities that actually make us feel good? It sounds obvious, yet we don't always use our breaks or our time off doing things that make us feel good – these are the things that truly recharge our energy, helping us avoid burnout.

RECHARGE CREATIVELY

Have you ever become completely immersed in a creative task – writing a poem, learning a song, drawing a picture – and found that, by the time you've finished, you've completely forgotten your worries?

According to a team of psychologists from San Francisco State and Illinois State universities, this is a scientifically verifiable phenomenon. They argue that creative activities are particularly likely to make us relax. And they have four characteristics that are especially helpful in making us feel good – ones that I like to remember using a simple acronym: CALM.

First, creative activities unlock our sense of *competence*. We learned in Chapter 2 that when we feel like we're gaining new skills, we get a boost of energy. Well, that's particularly likely when you're doing something creative. As you write that poem or craft that song, you experience a sense of improving at your craft. And so your competence grows.

Second, creative activities play to our feelings of *autonomy*. This concept too was introduced in Chapter 2, where we learned that a sense of ownership over our work is highly energising. Similarly, when we engage in creative activities, we're likely to feel the same sense of autonomy that helps us rejuvenate. For example, if you take up painting, you've got control over exactly what you're painting and how you're painting it.

Third, creative activities give us a feeling of *liberty*. They help us properly disengage from our work; it's hard to remain in 'work mode' when you're fully focused on learning to play the guitar. That gives us a feeling of freedom that takes us away from the rest of our working lives.

And finally, creative activities help us *mellow*. Done right, creative activities are relaxed and low stakes. Practising your knitting skills by making a sweater for your friend with some soft background music (rather

than, say, entering the sweater into a high-stakes knitting competition with 2,000 rivals and a looming deadline) helps escape the stresses of work time.

So creative tasks, done properly, can unlock our energy in at least four ways. But this raises some questions. In practice, how can we tell which creative tasks are going to calm us? And how can we integrate them into our lives?

EXPERIMENT 1:
Calm Hobbies

Former US President George W. Bush, King Charles III of England and pop sensation Taylor Swift have more in common than you might think.

There are the obvious similarities, of course. They're all absurdly wealthy. They're all the subject of wild conspiracy theories. They're all prone to going on opulent tours around the world. But they also share something more unexpected: a love of painting. Bush paints military veterans; King Charles paints slightly twee Scottish landscapes; Swift paints all sorts – seascapes, flowers, foliage – usually in bold, atmospheric colours.

Painting is, to my mind, the quintessential CALM activity. However inexperienced someone is when they begin painting, by sticking with it, they'll continue to gain competence over time. They generally have autonomy over what they're painting and how they're painting it. It's likely detached from their day-to-day work, and so hobbyist painters experience the feeling of liberation. And it's generally a mellowing, relaxed activity.

But what makes painting particularly important is that, for almost everyone, it will only ever be a hobby. It's something you enjoy purely on its own terms, with no end point in sight, and no monetary benefit to be found.

Hobbies are the first way we can integrate CALM activities into our lives. The defining characteristic of a hobby is that it's low stakes; there's simply no way to win or lose a hobby, nor to turn it into a business. Very few of us are likely to discover in adulthood that we're professional-standard painters (especially not George W. Bush).

How can we maximise the potential of these creative hobbies? The trick is to ensure that they remain just that: distinct from your work, with no clear end point and no stress. To this end, it can be helpful to make sure that your hobby has clear boundaries. Establish specific times for your creative activity, and distinguish it from your work and daily responsibilities. Try dedicating a particular room or space to your hobby, turning off work notifications during your creative time, or setting a regular schedule for when you'll engage in your chosen activity.

Next, continually remind yourself that the hobby should be enjoyed for the process, rather than any kind of high-stakes goal. As you paint, play or build, remind yourself that this is an arena in which quality doesn't matter. So allow yourself to make mistakes, experiment, and grow at your own pace. Your primary goal is not to become an expert or a master. It's to enjoy and to recharge.

Above all, resist the urge to turn your hobby into 'work'. In 2017, George W. Bush published a collection of his paintings called *Portraits of Courage*. Critics were generally surprised by the quality of his handiwork, even if he did give some of his subjects somewhat misshapen features. But going public with your hobby in this way – trying to put it into the public eye, or even monetise it – is risky. It means you might no longer view your hobby as true recreation, and instead see it as another side hustle.

If you want to properly recharge, you need to maintain areas of your life in which personal advancement doesn't feature at all.

EXPERIMENT 2:
Calm Projects

Another way to recharge your energy creatively is by undertaking a specific project. Unlike an open-ended hobby, a project has a definite beginning and end. Projects can be particularly useful in building our sense of competence and autonomy as they give us a feeling of accomplishment when we reach our end goal.

Before I started writing this book (and after I'd got over my junior doctor meltdown), learning about productivity was my creative project. For months, I'd get home from work, put on some music and read about the

science of getting things done. I was developing competence because I was constantly learning about the latest psychological research. I had autonomy because I could do whatever I wanted during this time, and could explore the methods creatively on my own. I had liberty from my day job as a doctor, which was entirely different to the experience of being a night-time productivity expert. And at the time, the stakes felt low – so I'd feel relaxed and mellow while reading. (To be fair, when I signed this book deal the stakes were raised a little.)

A CALM project can be almost anything creative that has a clear end point. You could take up photography, setting yourself the goal of taking a photo every day for a year. You could learn to code, setting yourself the goal of creating a text-based role-playing game. You could develop the skill of quilting, setting yourself the goal of creating a gift for your mum's next birthday.

And if you want to further supercharge the effects of your CALM project, consider incorporating people into it. As we saw in Chapter 3, when we undertake a task with friends or as part of our wider community, we harness the energy that comes from human connection. We thrive in environments where we can learn from one another, exchange ideas, and celebrate our successes together.

If your CALM project involves painting or drawing, you could join a local art class or Meetup group where you can share your progress. If you're passionate about writing, you could become part of a writing group or attend workshops, where you can grow together as writers. Whatever your project, when you build a community around your project you harness the recharging power of people.

RECHARGE NATURALLY

In a quiet ward in a suburban Pennsylvania hospital, two groups of patients were recovering from gallbladder surgery. But they weren't recovering at the same speed.

One group had rooms with windows overlooking a serene grove of leafy trees. The other faced a cold, lifeless brick wall. Roger Ulrich, who was just

embarking on his career as an assistant professor researching environmental aesthetics, was interested in what effect this difference had. To his surprise, he found that the patients whose windows faced the greenery were healing on average a whole day faster, requiring significantly less pain medication and experiencing fewer complications than their counterparts staring at the wall.

So began Ulrich's lifelong fascination with the impact of nature on the healing process. Just under a decade later, he would team up with colleagues at Uppsala University Hospital in Sweden to test the effects of nature on recovery more rigorously. His team focused on 160 heart surgery patients in the intensive care unit. The patients were randomly placed in one of six conditions: a room with a simulated 'window view' featuring a large nature photograph, depicting either an open tree-lined stream or a shadowy forest scene, one of two abstract paintings, a plain white panel, or a blank wall. So not much difference between the rooms, you might think. And yet the effects were striking. Patients who were assigned the tranquil water and tree scene experienced significantly less anxiety and required fewer doses of potent pain medication. Those who were exposed to the darker forest photograph, abstract art, or no images at all fared substantially worse.

Over the next forty years, Ulrich's research into the healing effects of nature would have a transformative effect on hospital architecture; it's part of the reason gardens and green spaces are such a common feature of modern hospitals around the world. Nature, his research shows, helps us heal – with decades of research indicating that spending time in nature triggers a physiological response that lowers stress levels and rejuvenates our ability to concentrate.

Nature replenishes our cognitive abilities and boosts our energy.

So basking in the glory of the natural world is our second way to recharge properly. Nature replenishes our cognitive abilities and boosts our energy. Nature makes us feel good. We need a way to integrate it into our rest.

EXPERIMENT 3:
Bring in Nature

You might well be thinking, ‘Yes, Ali, we’d all like to spend more time with nature. Unfortunately, quite a lot of us live in sprawling concrete jungles or bland suburbia.’ Finding nature is easier said than done.

But to me, this is why Ulrich’s research is so revolutionary. Remember, the participants in Ulrich’s study merely glanced at some photos of trees. The trees weren’t even there! And yet the effects were still significant. The science is clear: connecting to nature takes less time – and less effort – than you think.

These connections can even take less than a minute. In one study, researchers gathered a group of 150 university students and put them through a test designed to measure their focus. Before and after the test, the participants took a 40-second ‘micro-break’ to view either a green roof or a concrete roof. Students who caught a glimpse of the green roof made significantly fewer errors and showed more consistent focus on the task at hand, compared to their peers who viewed the concrete roof.

In fact, these connections need not even involve visual stimulation. One study published in 2018 had participants close their eyes and listen to natural soundscapes (bird song, the sounds of a rainforest, the sounds of seagulls, the sounds of summer rain). Even though they only listened to the soothing natural sounds for seven minutes, they reported feeling more energised in their work for hours afterwards.

So taking energy from nature doesn’t necessarily mean plunging yourself into the great outdoors for a seven-hour hike. One obvious way is to consider integrating a green space into your home. Ideally that might mean creating a small garden, or acquiring some indoor plants. But if you have neither the time nor resources, never fear: simply putting a photo of the natural world on your bedside table will have a recharging effect.

Or consider carving out time to listen to natural sounds. You need not actually immerse yourself in a rainforest to convince your subconscious that you’re in one. So why not spend five minutes at bedtime listening to

rainforest sounds on your phone – just for long enough to relax you into sleep?

EXPERIMENT 4:
Take a Walk

Another way to recharge is even simpler than downloading a nature sounds app: go for a walk.

Figures ranging from Steve Jobs to Virginia Woolf have emphasised the importance of their daily wanderings in order to feel truly rested. The philosopher-poet Henry David Thoreau once said, ‘I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least – and it is commonly more than that – sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements.’

Again, however, this advice is at risk of inducing some eye rolls of epic proportions. Thoreau was able to spend four hours a day walking because his friend, the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, was kind enough to let him live rent-free in his big forest in Massachusetts for a large chunk of the 1840s. Not all of us are so lucky; four hours of wandering ‘absolutely free from all worldly engagements’ is not that easy to shoehorn into your day, between your job, family and friends. Some of us have to work for a living, Henry.

I sometimes feel similar about the dictum that we should all walk 10,000 steps a day. This number – now embraced by the World Health Organization, the American Heart Foundation and various others – is so entrenched that devices like the Apple Watch and the Fitbit have adopted it. It’s almost as ubiquitous as the 5-a-day recommendation for fruits and vegetables. However – as with 5-a-day – the actual origin and scientific basis of this number are dubious. It’s like a modern-day equivalent of Thoreau’s ‘four hours or bust’. Some people will hit the 10,000 steps. Some won’t. But it’s not entirely clear why this has to be the objective in the first place.

One study from 2011 shows that steps taken may not be the most important thing when it comes to harnessing the effects of a good walk. That year, a group of psychologists from Sweden and the Netherlands investigated the effect of walking on mental health. They recruited twenty

university students to participate in a field experiment. The results showed, unsurprisingly, that walking made people feel better, less anxious and less time-pressured. But they also got the participants to take two forty-minute walks in different environments (a park versus a street) and different social contexts (alone versus with a friend). These researchers' findings were unequivocal: participants felt more relaxed during park walks than street walks. And they felt more revitalised during park walks when alone – perhaps because this let them soak up the natural world better – but more revitalised during street walks when with a friend – probably because of the effect of people on our energy levels.

If you're looking for a simple and easy way to immediately feel rejuvenated, just try taking a walk – no time limit, no distance to reach, no place in particular to go. If you can, take your stroll through a park, or a forest, or just a particularly verdant street. If you want, bring a friend. It may not be the four hours that Thoreau recommended, but even a ten-minute stroll down the block during your break might be enough to change your day – and your life – for the better.

RECHARGE MINDLESSLY

So far in this chapter, our focus has been on what I call mindful recharging, such as finding new hobbies, buying a house plant, or taking a walk down a tree-lined boulevard. All of these approaches involve active engagement. They re-energise us because we're investing energy into our rest, like plugging a phone into a charger.

As you might have guessed, however, I've not always been the best at focusing on my active recharge activities. And in my defence, there's something to be said for mindless recharging too.

I'd define mindless recharging as any activity you find yourself doing when you're not thinking too hard about relaxing. They might even be some of the activities you had in the first list you made earlier in this chapter.

While these mindless activities tend not to be particularly good long-term strategies for recharging, they can be effective in small doses. In some cases, the most energising and productive thing you can do isn't to focus

intently on learning a new song on the guitar. It might well be to flop on the couch and binge-watch some reality TV.

It's all there in the wording. Mindful activities are great, but they're mind-*full*. They require us to consciously direct our awareness towards specific things. That means that they need a certain input of energy to be effective.

If you've got the energy, that's great. But sometimes we'll have days when we get home from work, or from an intense day with the in-laws, or from an afternoon filled with cascades of bad luck and feel so drained that forcing ourselves to paint a picture or go find a particularly leafy street to wander down might be no fun – and may actually be a recipe for injury.

In those cases, guilt-free time to do nothing much might be just what we need. But here too, there's a knack to doing nothing right.

EXPERIMENT 5:
Let Your Mind Wander

'Since people only kill the spiders they see, humans are acting as an agent of natural selection, causing spiders to be selected for reclusion and intelligence. We are making spiders smarter.'

'Based on how much you can bond with someone by hating the same thing, a dating app based on dislikes would probably be fairly successful.'

'The real gauge of friendship is how clean your house needs to be before they can come over.'

These reflections are all gleaned from one of my favourite pages on the internet, the Reddit forum r/Showerthoughts. It's a space for people to post the most profound and weird thoughts that come to them during their daily ablutions.

It's unlikely that a particularly large proportion of Redditors posting on the page realise it, but they're actually vindicating a famous neuroscientific theory. You've probably experienced it yourself. You step into the shower, stand under the hot water, the aromas of your shampoo and soap lulling you into a relaxed state. Suddenly, your eyes open – the solution to some problem you've been struggling with is miraculously clear! Maybe you figured out exactly what to say in that email to your boss. Maybe you

remember where you've left your car keys. The 'shower principle' isn't just a Redditor's fantasy. When the brain relaxes sufficiently, creative solutions do appear.

It's all down to the power of a particular kind of mindless recharging: namely mind-wandering. According to recent neuroscientific research, even when we're 'doing nothing', our brains are still active. In particular, there's a region of the brain called the 'default mode network' (DMN) that governs the strange places our absent minds go to. The DMN helps us to recall memories, to daydream and to imagine the future. And it becomes more active the less engaged we are with mentally draining tasks.

The problem with modern life is that we're not very good at giving ourselves the time and space to activate our DMN. If anything, mind-wandering gets a bad reputation, often being equated with wasting time. Since we usually can't remember what we were pondering in our daydreams, it's difficult to imagine that anything beneficial could result from it. We imagine wrong. Doing nothing can be surprisingly productive.

What would it look like to integrate time for 'nothing' into our lives? Well, the simplest way is to actively schedule moments of 'nothingness' into your week. Some nights, you don't need to go for a walk or paint a picture. Some nights, you should simply let yourself zone out. Even put it in your calendar: one evening next week will be your evening of oblivion.

Alternatively, you might decide that while you're doing your weekly chores – washing the dishes, hanging up the laundry, or going to the grocery store – you're not going to listen to anything on your headphones. It's a counter-intuitive method for productivity enthusiasts, and one that I often have to force myself to partake in. And yet it works.

It might feel unproductive. But sometimes, it's just the time your brain needs to wander – and so solve problems with perspectives you didn't realise you had.

EXPERIMENT 6:
The Reitoff Principle

Even scheduling time for mind-wandering involves doing something. You're still in productivity mode; it's just that your productivity

is going to be activated by doing as little as possible.

Sometimes, even this is too much. Back when I was balancing my full-time job as a junior doctor with growing my business, I'd sometimes return home buzzing with energy, eager to dive into filming and editing videos. But other evenings, I was utterly exhausted from a gruelling day at the hospital, with every fibre of my being craving the comfort of the sofa and the mindless escape of Netflix.

On these days, I'd flop onto the sofa. 'I really need to film this video,' I'd think. 'I'll get up in thirty minutes.' But as the half-hour wore on, actually filming the video would seem less and less appealing.

Sometimes, my flatmate Molly (also a doctor) would stage an intervention. 'Ali, if you're tired, why don't you just write off the evening and rest?' she would ask.

Her words planted a seed in my mind. What if she was right? Why couldn't I just write off the evening and truly relax? As I wrestled with this internal conflict, I stumbled upon a term that perfectly encapsulated my newfound perspective: the 'Reitoff principle'.

The Reitoff principle is the idea that we should grant ourselves permission to *write off* a day and intentionally step away from achieving anything. For many of us, the challenge of rest lies in the act of stepping back from the things we think we should be doing. We're conditioned to value self-control, grit and persistence. We equate rest with laziness, weakness or failure.

Embracing the Reitoff principle means recognising that – sometimes – it's worth doing nothing at all. Not having deep shower thoughts. Not having a gentle walk. Nada.

These days, I use the Reitoff principle to help me feel less guilty about taking time off. When I feel worn down, tired and struggle to find the energy to keep going, I tell myself that it's ok to give up on the day so that I can do other things guilt-free, like playing video games and ordering takeaway. I tell myself that this short-term 'unproductiveness' gives me time to reset and recharge.

By doing less today, you can do more of what matters to you tomorrow.

It also helps me realise that in reality I probably don’t actually want a Reitoff day every day. By allowing yourself to occasionally hit the pause button and step away from the constant pressure, you create space for growth and creativity. By doing less today, you can do more of what matters tomorrow.

IN SUMMARY

- Our second kind of burnout relates to rest time. Depletion burnouts result from not giving yourself enough time or space to truly recharge. The solution: understand how to rest in a way that energises you.
- The best way to rest is all about feeling calm. Or rather, CALM. Find an activity or project that makes you feel Competent, Autonomous, Liberated and Mellow.
- A second solution is to spend time in and with nature. Even a tiny amount of greenery can have a transformative impact. So take a walk, even if it's a short one. And try bringing nature indoors – whether that's a new house plant or just the soundtrack of some birds chirping.
- Not all rest needs to be so strategic, however. Sometimes, the most energising thing you can do is to do nothing at all. By doing less today, you'll feel better tomorrow.

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CHAPTER 9

ALIGN

The Pacific Crest Trail is not for the faint of heart. Spanning 2,650 miles of mountainous terrain in the western United States, it encompasses the entire length of America, from the deserts at the Mexican border to the mountains of north Washington. It's renowned as one of the most arduous – and sometimes dangerous – hiking trails in America.

Every summer, thousands of intrepid walkers set off on the trail, beginning in spring and knowing they won't arrive at the Canadian border until five months later. For most people, this sounds like a hellish feat of endurance. For University of Missouri professor Kennon Sheldon, it sounded like a perfect opportunity for a psychological experiment.

Sheldon is a titanic figure in a recent wave of research into human motivation. At the turn of the millennium, many people thought that the great questions about motivation had been resolved. As we learned in Part 1, since the 1970s scientists had been aware of the two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is where you're doing something because it feels inherently enjoyable. Extrinsic motivation is where you're doing something because of an external reward – like making money, or winning a prize. In the years since these two forms of motivation were theorised, countless studies had shown that when we're intrinsically motivated to do something, we're more effective and energised by doing it; and that extrinsic rewards can, in the long run, make us less motivated to do something for its own sake. Intrinsic motivation = good, extrinsic = bad. And that was that.

Except Sheldon had a hunch that things might be a bit more complicated. Starting in the 1990s, he started to wonder whether we were missing something crucial about the science of motivation. Yes, on the face

of it, the evidence seemed clear that extrinsic motivation was ‘worse’ than intrinsic motivation. At the same time, though, our lives are filled with instances in which we clearly are motivated by extrinsic rewards – and motivated well.

Imagine a student (let’s call her Katniss) studying for exams. Katniss doesn’t enjoy the studying process itself, so her motivation to study isn’t intrinsic. For now, she’s motivated by something other than the pure joy of studying and learning.

How might Katniss be motivating herself to study? Here are some options:

- **Option A**: I’m studying because my parents are forcing me to. I hate this subject, but if I don’t pass, I’ll be grounded for a month. I need to study to avoid this terrible punishment.
- **Option B**: I’m studying out of a sense of guilt. I hate this subject, but I know that my parents have worked hard to send me to this school, and I know I should value the opportunity to do well so that I can get into a good college. I feel anxious and guilty when I’m not studying, so I’m putting in a few hours of work each night for this exam.
- **Option C**: I’m studying because I genuinely care about doing well in school. Yes I hate this subject, but I have to pass this exam to qualify for the classes I actually want to take next year. And I’m trying to do well in those because I really want to go to college, to broaden my horizons, and maybe even apply to medical school someday. My parents aren’t forcing me to do any of this. Yes they’ll be disappointed if I fail, but I’m not studying for them. I’m studying for me.

All three of these options would fall under the category of ‘extrinsic motivation’: in each case, Katniss isn’t studying because it’s inherently enjoyable. Instead, she’s studying to achieve some external outcome (avoiding punishment, eliminating guilt, or getting into her desired classes). But clearly, these three options represent very different attitudes towards work and life. Option C might even be quite a healthy form of motivation:

one that encourages Katniss to work towards goals she values, even if the process isn't intrinsically pleasurable.

Katniss' example demonstrates that, in fact, not all extrinsic motivation is inherently 'bad'. Like Katniss studying for the subject she hates, we all have to do things we don't enjoy at times. And even when we start off enjoying something, if we do it for long enough, there are always going to be periods of hardship. In these moments, it's rarely helpful to be told that if only we were enjoying ourselves more we'd be able to persevere.

Not all extrinsic motivation is inherently 'bad'.

Which brings us back to Sheldon and the Pacific Crest Trail. He began to suspect that anyone who embarked on the PCT was pretty likely to experience a collapse in intrinsic motivation at some point. What was motivating them to continue? he wondered.

So he decided to test it out. In 2018, Sheldon recruited a group of people who were interested in hiking the PCT. This group represented a mix of abilities. Seven had never backpacked before; thirty-seven had backpacked 'a few times'; forty-six had backpacked 'quite a lot'; and four had done it all their life. Before the hike started, Sheldon measured their motivation by getting participants to rate the accuracy of the following statements, each measuring a different type of motivation:

'I'm hiking the PCT because…'

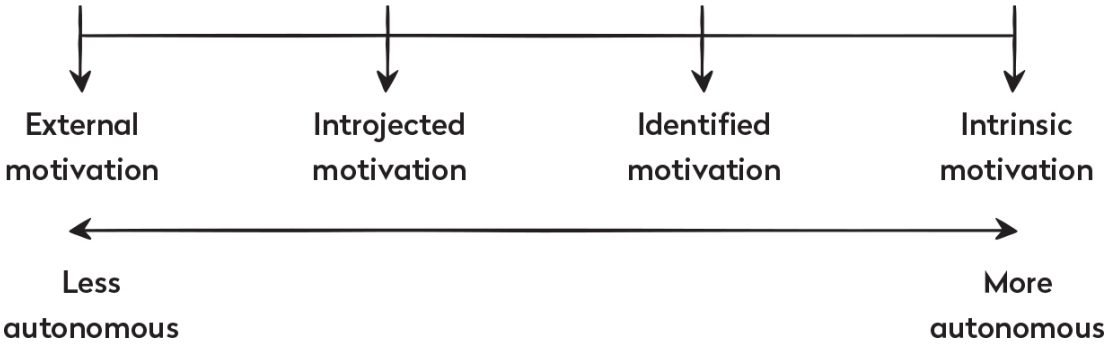
- hiking the PCT will be interesting
- hiking the PCT is personally important to me
- I want to feel proud of myself
- I will feel like a failure if I didn't hike the PCT
- important people will like me better if I complete the PCT
- honestly, I don't know why I am hiking the PCT

When Sheldon looked at the data, he found that practically all the hikers saw drops in intrinsic motivation during the marathon hike. This isn't surprising – when you're walking 2,650 miles across freezing terrain over five months, it's hard to genuinely enjoy every step.

Sheldon was more interested in the form of extrinsic motivation the hikers turned to when their intrinsic motivation inevitably declined. By 2017, many scientists had begun to suspect that, as with Katniss studying for her exams, there were three discrete types of extrinsic motivation in addition to the purely intrinsic form. They fall on a spectrum called the 'relative autonomy continuum' (or RAC):

- **External Motivation**. 'I'm doing this because important people will like and respect me more if I do.' People who highly rated this statement have high external motivation.
- **Introjected Motivation**. 'I'm doing this because I'll feel guilty or bad about myself if I don't.' People who highly rated this statement have high introjected motivation.
- **Identified Motivation**. 'I'm doing this because I truly value the goal it's helping me work towards.' People who highly rated this statement have high identified motivation.
- **Intrinsic Motivation**. 'I'm doing this because I love the process as an end in itself.' People who highly rated this statement have high intrinsic motivation.

We can plot these four forms on a spectrum from less to more autonomous.



External motivation is the form of extrinsic motivation that's the least autonomous; instead of us being motivated by any kind of internal force, we're being controlled by the opinions, rules and rewards offered by others. Further along the spectrum, identified motivation is the most autonomous

form of extrinsic motivation. Even though we might be doing something for the external reward associated with it, we *value* that reward or end-goal – and crucially, that value was determined by us, not foisted upon us by others.

Using this framework, Sheldon spotted something fascinating about the PCT hikers. The best predictor of their performance was the specific *kind* of extrinsic motivation they drew upon when their intrinsic motivation waned. Using the data he collected on the hikers' motivation, wellbeing and hike performance, he showed that those who had higher levels of both introjected and identified motivation were far more likely to complete the trail. They managed to tap into these forms of extrinsic motivation to help sustain their progress even when the going got tough.

At the same time, Sheldon asked each of the walkers about their mood on the hike, using a series of well-established tests for subjective well-being (SWB), psychology jargon for 'happiness'. Therein lay his second intriguing insight: the only type of extrinsic motivation that corresponded with greater happiness was identified motivation. In other words, it was the hikers who motivated themselves by aligning their actions with what they truly valued who not only completed the trail – but also felt happiest at the end of it. Sheldon didn't use the term, but you might say that these hikers were experiencing feel-good productivity.

This study hints at our final insight into reducing our risk of burnout. So far, we've explored how to avoid what I call overexertion burnouts, which arise from taking on too much, and depletion burnouts, which arise from working too hard. But there's a third kind of burnout: one I call misalignment burnout.

Misalignment burnout arises from the negative feelings that arise when our goals don't match up to our sense of self. We feel worse – and so achieve less – because we're not acting authentically. In these moments, our behaviour is driven by external forces – rather than by a deeper alignment between *who we are* and *what we're doing*. This alignment is something that only intrinsic and identified motivation can offer.

The solution? To work out what really matters to you – and align your behaviour with it.

It’s a transformative method; one that can make us feel fundamentally better about our lives. We’ve already explored that we all have to do things we don’t like, and that others expect of us. I don’t particularly enjoy taking my car to get serviced, or cleaning the toilet, or filing my taxes. In these moments, we might not enjoy the task we’re undertaking – and that can drain our energy. But we can sustain our feel-good productivity by aligning our present-day actions with a deeper sense of self.

THE LONG-TERM HORIZON

When it comes to aligning your actions with your values, it can be helpful to think about the long term. The really long term.

Consider as an example the 1994 Los Angeles earthquake. On 17 January 1994, a 6.7 magnitude earthquake shook the city – killing fifty-seven people and injuring thousands more. Among the survivors were the employees of Sepulveda Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC), located just 2km from the epicentre. The hospital was severely damaged and many of the hospital employees’ homes were also destroyed.

A group of researchers led by Professor Emily Lykins at the University of Kentucky used this harrowing experience to explore a simple concept: that when we think about death, we get a clearer view of life.

When we think about death, we get a clearer view of life.

The scientists asked seventy-four VAMC employees to fill in two questionnaires which asked them about the importance of various life goals, both before and after the event. The goals were categorised into intrinsic (e.g. cultivating close friendships and personal growth) and extrinsic (e.g. career advancement and material possessions). They also asked participants questions like ‘At any time during the earthquake did you think you might die?’ to get a sense of how greatly the participants had experienced ‘mortality threat’.

The data revealed a clear pattern. After the earthquake, employees reported valuing intrinsic goals more than extrinsic ones. What’s more, the greater the sense of mortality threat they had experienced, the larger the

shift towards intrinsic goals. For instance, an employee who had once been solely driven by career advancement and material wealth now found themself investing more time and energy into nurturing close relationships with family and friends. Another employee, who had previously sought validation through external praise, began to pursue creative work and personal growth for its own sake.

They show why it's helpful to think about the most long-term time horizon of all, the end of our lives. We generate identified motivation when we can connect our goals and actions to our sense of a meaningful existence. The problem is that if you asked fifty people, 'What does a meaningful existence look like to you?' you'd be lucky if two of them gave you a clear answer. It's a hard question.

And that's where the method identified by those scientists in LA comes in. Think about the very end of your life. And use it to reappraise what matters in the here and now.

EXPERIMENT 1:
The Eulogy Method

Fortunately, you need not be caught up in a catastrophic earthquake to approach your life with the end in mind – as Leigh Penn's obituary showed.

'Leigh Penn, champion of at-risk youth, dies at 90,' the account of her life read. 'Leigh worked vehemently to close the opportunity divide.' It vividly describes her involvement in some of the most notable causes of her time, whether leading an innovative charity that provided educational opportunities to young people from deprived backgrounds, or helping the US Navy roll out a scheme to provide training to underserved communities across America. But even with such a high-powered career, she never lost sight of her relationships. 'Despite being an MBA and CEO, Leigh's favourite title was Mom,' the obituary wrote.

It was a remarkable, 'impactful' life. There were just a few issues. First, Penn hadn't actually accomplished any of the achievements listed in the obituary. Second, she hadn't actually lived to a ripe old age of ninety. And third, she hadn't actually died.

In fact, Penn was a student at Stanford Business School taking a famous course, ‘Lives of Consequence’. The professor, Rod Kramer, routinely assigns his students to write their own obituaries as though they have lived an ideal life – the best they can imagine – to its end.

‘The goal of this course is to change the way you think about your life and its possible impact on the world,’ the description reads. For many, including Penn, this was transformative. ‘This caused me to pause and ask, am I allocating enough time to the people I love? Or am I overly caught up in the career rat race?’ she later wrote. Reflecting on death shed light on how to live.

I’ve often used a similar approach myself. I call it the ‘eulogy method’. My iteration involves focusing not on your obituary, but on your funeral. Simply ask yourself: ‘What would I feel good about someone saying in my eulogy?’ Think about what you’d like a family member, a close friend, a distant relative, a co-worker, to say at your funeral.

This method helps us get at the question of ‘What do I value?’ from other people’s perspective. At your funeral, even your co-workers would be unlikely to say, ‘He helped us close lots of million-dollar deals.’ They’d talk about how you were as a person – your relationships, your character, your hobbies. And they’d talk about the positive impact you had on the world, not how much money you made for your employer.

Now apply what you’ve learned to your life today. What does the life you want people to remember in a few decades mean for the life you should build now?

So having started in this cheerful place, let’s bring things a little closer to home.

EXPERIMENT 2:
The Odyssey Plan

In the early 1990s, Bill Burnett spent several years working at Apple. His claim to fame was always that he helped design the first Apple mouse. But in fact, Burnett worked on dozens of different projects, soon becoming an integral part of the design team. It was during this period that

he began to develop a keen understanding of the intersection between good design and human need.

One day, he had an intriguing idea. Could the tools he had used to design the world's best hardware also be applied to a human life?

Over the next few years, Burnett would come up with a new method for crafting a happier, more fulfilling existence; he called it 'designing your life'. By applying design thinking to personal development, Burnett thought he could help people live in ways that were truer and more authentic, an approach that eventually formed the basis of the 'Design Your Life' course at Stanford University.

When I first discovered the Design Your Life method, it was a revelation. At the time I was a few months into my second year working as a junior doctor on obstetrics and gynaecology, and I felt a little stuck. I had a clear sense of who I was. I knew I enjoyed medicine, I loved teaching medical students, I had a small but close circle of friends and I enjoyed the routine of spending Saturday mornings at my favourite coffee shop in Cambridge's town centre. But exactly what I wanted from life eluded me.

That's when a friend told me about a particular exercise from the eponymous *Design Your Life* book. It promised to turn my vague ideas about what I wanted into a clear picture underpinned by evidence. The approach was called the 'odyssey plan'.

At the heart of the exercise was a simple question: what do you want your life to look like in five years' time? Nothing particularly profound there, I thought; anyone who has ever had a middle-of-the-road job interview has thought about that one. But Burnett's design mindset offers an unusual way to answer the question. He invites you to reflect on:

- **Your Current Path:** Write out, in detail, what your life would look like five years from now if you continued down your current path.
- **Your Alternative Path:** Write out, in detail, what your life would look like five years from now if you took a completely different path.
- **Your Radical Path:** Write out, in detail, what your life would look like five years from now if you took a completely different path,

where money, social obligations and what people would think, were irrelevant.

The point isn't that one of these futures is actually your 'concrete plan' (there's a conspicuous absence of concrete when it comes to life planning). The point is just to open your mind to the possibilities.

For some people, the first option is the one they genuinely, authentically want to go for. If that's you, great news; you're already aligned with your future self. But for many people, it helps you to realise that the path you're on isn't the path that you really want.

In my case, writing the odyssey plan made me realise that this life I was on track for – being a full-time doctor – wasn't exciting me anymore. My current trajectory was filled with fixtures like 'training in an anaesthesiology residency programme in the UK'. Seeing it written out made me realise that I'd set out on this path several years prior, but something in me had changed in that time – to the point that this future no longer seemed energising.

And so I changed track. The odyssey plan inspired me to focus on growing my business, instead of continuing on the path to become a medical consultant. To this day, whenever I'm at a crossroads, I repeat this exercise. By sketching out the paths ahead, you can work out which one you really want to take.

THE MEDIUM-TERM HORIZON

Thinking about the long-term horizon is great for figuring out what we value in the abstract. But it might feel a little nebulous. After all, if you're in your twenties or thirties then your eulogy in (hopefully) half a century's time might seem distant. How do you turn these abstract life plans into a coherent strategy for how to live over the next, say, year?

The answer comes from a simple method that scientists call 'values affirmation interventions', a scientific term for identifying your core personal values right now, and continually reflecting on them. In the last section, we sketched out some idealised life plans. With these values affirmations, we can turn them into a set of concrete ideas about what we plan to do over the next year.

These interventions are particularly powerful when you have low self-confidence in your ability to achieve what you want to in the long run. In a paper published in the journal *Science*, a group of psychologists used values affirmation interventions to close the gender achievement gap in physics, a subject heavily dominated by men. Among the 400 students in the class that Akira Miyake and colleagues recruited, female students tended to perform worse than male students; they also held the belief that men were more suited to physics than women.

Miyake's intervention was a classic values affirmation exercise. Every student was shown a list of twelve possible values:

1. Being good at art
2. Creativity
3. Relationships with family and friends
4. Government or politics
5. Independence
6. Learning and gaining knowledge
7. Athletic ability
8. Belonging to a social group (such as your community, racial group or school club)
9. Music
10. Career
11. Spiritual or religious values

12. Sense of humour

Half of the students were asked to write about which three values were most important to them, and why they chose them. The other half were asked to pick the three values that were least important to them, and write about why they might be important to someone else. This simple writing exercise had a huge effect on their mid-term exam: the intervention significantly reduced the gender gap in exam scores and improved women's performance. And this was particularly true for women who tended to endorse the stereotype that men do better than women in physics.

Why? One possible explanation is that by affirming their values, these women were able to remember what mattered the most to them, and keep it in mind during the examination.

Values affirmations make our most abstract ideals real. And they boost our confidence along the way.

So values affirmations make our most abstract ideals real. And they boost our confidence along the way. The only question is how to find these values – and how to use them.

EXPERIMENT 3:
The Wheel of Life

I first got thinking about values affirmations in my penultimate year in medical school. I remember sitting in a cramped, sweltering lecture theatre on a roasting summer's day, feeling slightly disgruntled. This should've been a time for celebration: my fifth-year exams were over, and everyone in the room was due to fly out to different countries for a 'medical elective', a two-month placement where we got medical experience anywhere in the world. My friends Ben and Olivia and I were flying to the Children's Surgical Centre in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the following week.

But first, we had a few galling additional lectures for one more week, including one called 'How to become a successful doctor'. It felt a bit much. I mean, wasn't this what we'd been learning about for the last five years? So imagine my surprise when our tutor, Dr Lillicrap, revealed that

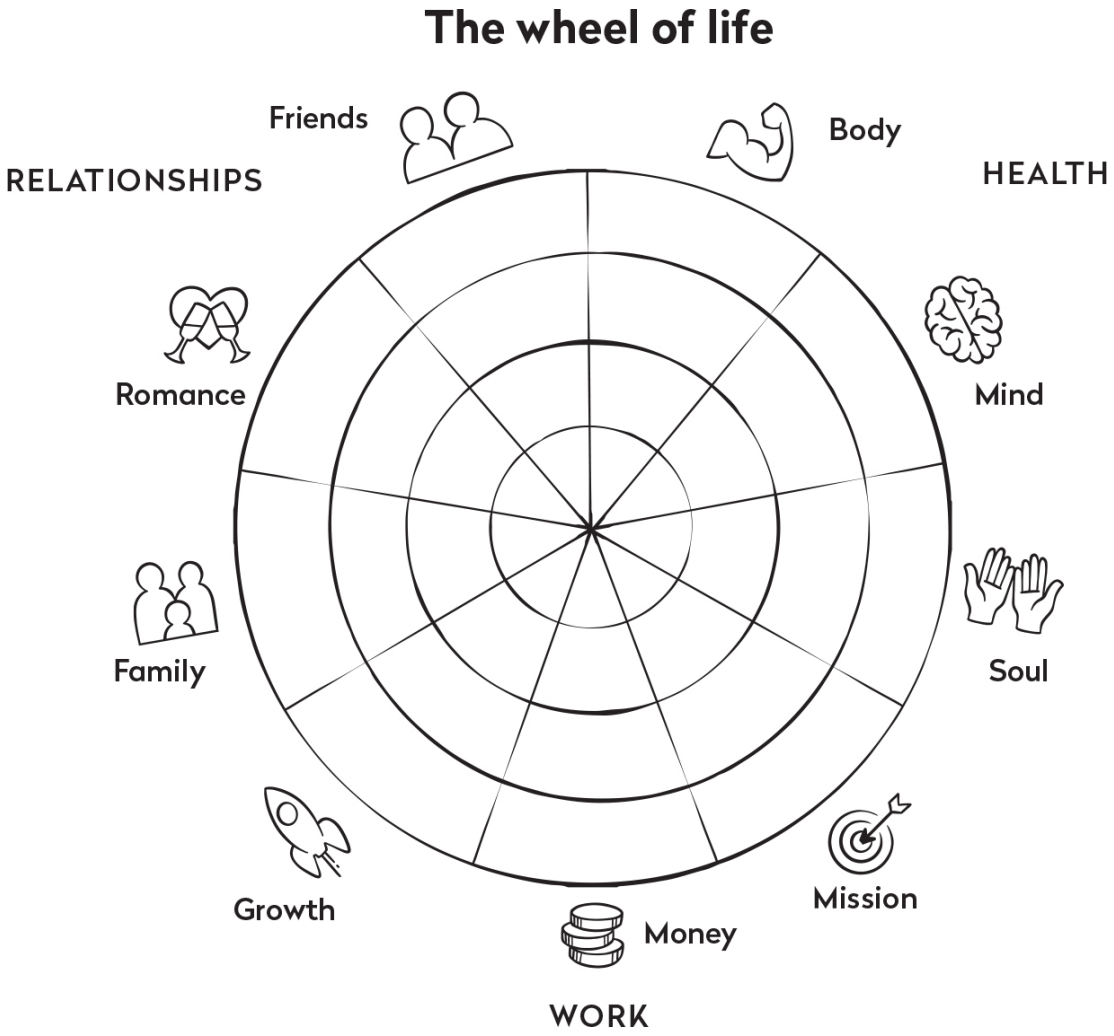
the session wasn’t about the joys of medical admin; it was about how we could learn to define ‘success’ for ourselves.

Dr Lillicrap explained that for too many medical students, ‘success’ often defaults to academic accolades and fancy job titles. Success means much more than that, he emphasised. And then he began handing out some sheets of paper marked up with a simple exercise: the ‘wheel of life’.

The wheel of life, Dr Lillicrap explained, was a coaching framework we could use to define success for ourselves. You start by drawing a circle and slicing it up into nine segments. Around the edges of each spoke of the wheel, you write down the major areas of your life. Below are the ones that Dr Lillicrap recommended as a starting point, although you could also come up with your own. We’ve got three for Health (Body, Mind and Soul); three for Work (Mission, Money, Growth) and three for Relationships (Family, Romance, Friends).

Next, you rate how aligned you feel in each area of your life. Ask yourself: ‘To what extent do I feel like my current actions are aligned with my personal values?’ And colour in the segment accordingly – if you feel fulfilled, fill it in entirely; if you feel completely unfulfilled, leave it blank.

My wheel of life threw up some interesting insights. It was the first time I’d thought about what I really wanted from life in a remotely structured way. I’d always had a vague goal of becoming a doctor who did some tech stuff on the side, but the wheel of life gave me the vocabulary to think of life more strategically. My three lowest-alignment areas were romance (part of relationships), body (part of health) and mission (part of work). And that prompted me to take action. I started dating. I started working out. And I started thinking seriously about launching my business; in fact, I recorded my very first videos on that secondment to Cambodia. Within minutes, the wheel of life had given me clarity on what I valued the most.



EXPERIMENT 4:
The 12-Month Celebration

The wheel of life goes some way to explaining how to turn your values into a set of coherent objectives. It's what inspired me to post that first video. It also inspired at least two of my classmates to quit medicine altogether (which might not have been Dr Lillicrap's intention).

But it still remains distant: we're talking about abstract values rather than specific steps. That's where our next method comes in: the '12-month celebration'. This is my favourite method to convert dreams into actions. The idea is simple. Imagine it's twelve months from now and you're having dinner with your best friend. You're celebrating how much progress you've made in the areas of life that are important to you over the last year.

Look back over the values that you identified in the wheel of life. Now, write down what you'd want to tell your best friend about your progress in each of them.

Category	Celebration
Health	**Body:** *In the past 12 months, I've found a workout routine that resonates with my lifestyle and preferences and have lost 15 pounds.* **Mind:** *In the past 12 months, I've prioritised my mental health by starting therapy. It's helped me become more self-aware and manage stress more effectively.* **Soul:** *In the past 12 months, I've committed to a daily meditation practice and attended a spiritual retreat.*
Work	**Mission:** *In the past 12 months, I've managed to transition into a new job that plays to my strengths, making my work more fulfilling and enjoyable.* **Money:** *In the past 12 months, I've paid off a big portion of my student loan debt and started saving for a down payment on a house.* **Growth:** *In the past 12 months, I've completed an online course that has expanded my skillset and made me more employable.*
Relationships	**Family:** *In the past 12 months, I've made more time for my family by scheduling regular visits and calls.* **Romance:** *In the past 12 months, I've strengthened my relationship with my partner through more open communication.* **Friends:** *In the past 12 months, I've made an effort to regularly reconnect with old friends and build new connections, leading to a more diverse and supportive social circle.*

Think of this as a less pessimistic version of the crystal ball method in Chapter 4 (see here). There, the focus was on how everything goes wrong. Here, the focus is on how everything goes right. Ask yourself: 'If I was to make the 12-month celebration a reality, what would I need to do over the next year to get there? And what is the first action step: joining that gym down the road? Polishing up my CV? Putting a weekly chat with my mum in the diary?

Suddenly, your values are no longer about the distant future. They're about your steps in the coming months.

THE SHORT-TERM HORIZON

For some, these steps to align your goals with your life might still feel too distant. Who you are next year can still feel dauntingly distant. You need to find a way to align your behaviour now, today.

Here, our goal is to make everyday decisions that align with our deepest sense of self. This doesn't just make us feel at ease. It is one of the most powerful drivers of feel-good productivity. In one study, Anna Sutton of the University of Waikato in New Zealand trawled through fifty-one studies made up of over 36,000 data points to explore the relationships between living authentically day-to-day and overall wellbeing. Her findings showed not only a positive relationship between authenticity and wellbeing, but also between authenticity and what she called 'engagement'. It amounted to a striking discovery. When people make decisions that align with their personal values and sense of self, they aren't just happier; they're more engaged with the tasks before them.

So the final ingredient in alignment involves a mindset shift: from thinking about our values at the level of lifetimes and years, to thinking about our values at the level of daily choices.

The question is how. We all make decisions every day that take us away from our values. The person who values freedom, but stays in a controlling job waiting for their shares to vest. The person who values close relationships, but spends most of their time working and neglects time with family and friends. These are instances where daily decisions don't align with what we most desire.

With the right tools, we can subtly shift ourselves back towards the things that matter the most.

But with the right tools, we can subtly shift ourselves back towards the things that matter the most, and in turn sustain our productivity (and enrich our lives) for longer.

EXPERIMENT 5:
The Three Alignment Quests

My favourite way to integrate long-term values into day-to-day decisions draws upon a simple fact: short-term targets feel much easier to reach than long-term ones.

This is something psychologists have understood for decades. In one famous study, researchers asked a group of seven-to-ten-year-olds who struggled with maths to set themselves targets for the days ahead. They were split into two groups and each was given a subtly different prompt. The first was told to aim for six pages of math problems in each of the seven sessions to come; the second simply to aim for forty-two pages of problems by the end of all the sessions.

Of course, these two sets of targets are just different ways of saying the same thing – in each case, the children ended up doing all forty-two pages. And yet the effects of focusing on the immediate goal over the distant one were remarkable. The kids who were set the ‘proximate’ goal didn’t just perform better; they performed twice as well as the other kids, correctly solving 80 per cent of problems to the 40 per cent of the other group. What’s more, they also ended up feeling more confident – one of our most important paths to feeling good. As the organisational psychologist Tasha Eurich summarised it, ‘Proximal goals hadn’t just helped these children solve problems – they’d changed the way they looked at math.’

What does this have to do with living your values? Well, it helps overcome the distance between where we are now and where we want to be.

The idea of a 12-month celebration might feel a little daunting. I often struggle to live for a single day in line with my values, let alone a whole year. But that’s where it helps to take a leaf from the book of those mathematically minded children. Each morning, simply choose three actions for the day ahead that will move you a tiny step closer to where you want to be in a year’s time.

Personally, I have my 12-month celebration saved in a Google Doc, bookmarked on my computer’s web browser. Whenever I sit down to begin work, I open up that Google Doc and scan through it to remind myself what my 12-month celebration looks like. Then, under each of the areas of

health, work and relationships, I choose one subcategory to focus on. Here's what my three alignment quests looked like this morning:

- H – Gym session 15.30–16:30
- W – Make progress in writing Chapter 9
- R – Call Nani (my grandma)

This method doesn't just work for fitness fanatics/writers/grandma fans like me. Say you're a college student aiming to improve your grades, maintain your fitness, and strengthen your friendships. Your three alignment quests for the day could look like:

- H – Go for a 30-minute run after class
- W – Spend an extra hour studying for tomorrow's exam
- R – Catch up with Katherine over coffee after study session

Or you're a working parent, juggling the demands of your job, your health and your family life. Your alignment quests could include:

- H – Take a 15-minute walk during my lunch break
- W – Complete the project proposal draft by lunchtime
- R – Cook a healthy dinner for the family and spend quality time together

The benefit of this approach is that it diminishes the terror-inducing scale of the massive 12-month objective. By focusing on the immediate, short-term steps – rather than on the whole year ahead – you turn living your values into something immediate. And achievable.

EXPERIMENT 6:
Alignment Experiments

When I first started my research into feel-good productivity a decade ago, the most powerful revelation wasn't any one study or insight. It was a method. Everything began when I applied the scientific way of

thinking I was being taught at medical school to questions of happiness, fulfilment and productivity.

So my final exercise brings us full circle, and involves learning to think about productivity like a scientist. To experiment with what brings you meaning. And use those experiments to inform the decisions you make every hour.

‘Alignment experiments’ can help you test theories about what might bring you closer to alignment in your day-to-day decision-making. It’s a process with three stages.

First, identify an area of your life where your actions feel particularly unfulfilling. The results of your eulogy method, odyssey plan and wheel of life exercises might have helped with this. But even without those exercises, you may feel a sense of misalignment in one or more areas of your life, whether your job, or your relationships, or your hobbies. Think about it – is there anywhere you feel things aren’t going well?

Think of a lawyer who has spent years climbing the corporate ladder, but who has come to realise that the long hours and high-stress environment are taking a toll on her personal life. For her, an alignment experiment might involve exploring alternative work arrangements that align better with her values. Or imagine a college student who chose a degree based on external expectations, like pressure from family, rather than his own genuine interests. He might find himself struggling to feel engaged in classes and worrying that he’s not on the right path for his future career. In this case, an alignment experiment might involve examining alternative educational pathways.

Second, come up with your hypothesis. We’re thinking like scientists here, and that means adopting an experimental mindset. All scientific experiments have an ‘independent variable’, the one thing you change to see what effect it could have. If you were to change one – just one – independent variable in your life, what would it be? And what effect do you think it would have on your situation?

This is your hypothesis. Our demotivated lawyer’s hypothesis might be: ‘Adjusting my working hours will lead to a better balance between work and personal fulfilment.’ Our stressed-out student’s hypothesis might be:

‘Switching to a course that aligns with my personal interests and values will lead to greater satisfaction and motivation in my academic life.’

Step three is the most crucial: execute. Make a change. And as you do so, see what effect it has on your situation – and your sense of alignment.

For this to work as an experiment, it’s important that your change is localised. If you dramatically transform every sphere of your life, you won’t know what’s driving any changes in your mood and sense of alignment. So to start with, keep it small. For our lawyer, that might mean negotiating a part-time work arrangement for three months, or delegating more draining activities to juniors to focus on energising projects – rather than immediately quitting her job. For our student, that might entail enrolling in a course in a different subject – rather than immediately trying to entirely switch degrees.

But as you do, keep track of the effects. Try keeping a log or journal of your experiences, noting any challenges, successes or insights that you gain along the way. By conducting these experiments, you give yourself the opportunity to explore an alternative path – without having to commit to it in the long term. Not yet, anyway.

These little experiments involve recognising that the journey to alignment is not one with a clear end-goal. It’s a never-ending process. As we navigate the laboratory of our lives, we must be willing to embrace experimentation – and to learn as we go.

IN SUMMARY

- Misalignment burnouts arise when we spend time on goals that don't match up with our sense of self. Overcoming misalignment is a lifelong task; one that requires us to continually work out what really matters to us, and change our behaviour accordingly.
- There are some surprisingly simple ways you can work out what matters to you today. First of all, look to your long-term future. Try envisioning yourself on your deathbed. Morbid as it sounds, this is the best way to give you a clearer view of what you want from your life right now.
- Next, think about your medium-term future. Reflect on what accomplishments you'd want to be celebrating in a year's time. Then ask yourself: what does that 12-month celebration mean for my actions this week?
- Last, you should be ready to think about your short-term future. Because the good news is, you can take a step to alignment right now. What are three actions today that might take you a little step closer to the life you want in a year?

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LAST WORD: THINK LIKE A PRODUCTIVITY SCIENTIST

My apartment is a ten-minute walk from one of the biggest hospitals in London.

Some days, when I can't focus as much as I'd like to, I wander east – through the crowds of Oxford Street's shops and beyond the grand Victorian terraces of Marylebone – until I reach the cavernous modern entrance hall. I buy a coffee in the reception and spend a few minutes watching the doctors bustle up and down the corridors. And I think about how much has changed since that fateful Christmas Day shift; the one where I dropped the tray of medical supplies.

Watching those doctors in their scrubs – usually looking admirably less stressed than I remember the job being – I reflect on how much I've learned since that day. When I remember that catastrophic afternoon, my first on-call holiday in the hospital ward, I now realise that my mistake wasn't in *what* I thought about productivity. It was in *how* I thought about it.

At the time, I was getting all the basic tactics wrong. Instead of viewing productivity in terms of what made me feel good, I was viewing it in terms of discipline: how much pressure I could pile on myself to just do *more*. Instead of trying to integrate play, power and people into every ward round, I was catastrophising about my sense of boredom, powerlessness and loneliness. And instead of trying to find the joy in that looming manual evacuation, I spent hours ruminating about how horrible it was going to be. (And, to be fair, it was indeed horrible.)

In the years since, everything about my life has changed. These days, I know that productivity isn't about discipline; it's about doing more of what makes you feel happier, less stressed, more energised. And I know that the

only way to escape procrastination and burnout is to find the joy in your situation – even if you've just dropped 136 vials of medicinal goo all over your clothes.

But my real error wasn't with my productivity tactics. It was with my overall strategy. I believed that if I simply learned every productivity hack and read every internet blog, I would achieve what I yearned for. It was exactly the opposite of the approach that I needed: to learn to think like a productivity scientist.

That's why I wanted the last tool in this book to be those alignment experiments. Because in the long run, it's only by adopting an experimental outlook that you can hope to learn the secrets of feel-good productivity. In this book, I've shared a few dozen experiments that worked for me. Some of them will work for you. Others won't. And that's ok.

Remember that this book isn't a to-do list. It's a philosophy – a way of creating your own personalised productivity toolkit. One that allows you to reap all of the amazing rewards of feeling good, every day, and in the long term. And one that involves approaching your daily projects and tasks in the spirit of experimentation.

So, I urge you: try as much as you can, figure out what works, and discard the rest. Ask yourself of every new approach: what effect does this have on my mood? On my energy? On my productivity? Don't rote-learn your way to feel-good productivity. Experiment your way.

Ultimately, it's only by continually evaluating what works for you that you'll work out how to feel better in the long run. Productivity is an evolving field, and you're evolving too. There's still so much to discover. Yet as you apply these principles in your life, you'll uncover the insights, strategies and techniques that work best for you. They may well be more useful than mine, especially because they came from within you.

Don't rote-learn your way to feel-good productivity. Experiment your way.

So enjoy the process. And as you go, remember that this process isn't about striving for perfection. It's about strategically stumbling your way to what works. Learning from your failures and celebrating your successes.

Transforming your work from a drain on your resources to a source of energy.

It’s a difficult mindset to adopt. But when you’ve adopted it, everything changes. If you can tap in to what makes you feel most energised and alive, you can get anywhere. And you can enjoy the journey too.

I can’t wait to see where your adventure takes you next.

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The next step of your journey …

As a thank you for finishing this book, here's a free gift to help with the next stage of your journey to feel-good productivity ♥

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, my warmest thanks go out to you, the reader, for picking up this book. Whether you've ever clicked, watched, listened, read, liked, commented, subscribed, or just quietly followed along since 2017, each interaction is a gift. The fact that you pay attention to what I put out there means the world to me, and allows me to make a living doing what I love – learning cool stuff and sharing it with the world.

And now, I've got a long list of people to thank. A book, like every good thing in life, is a team effort. Even though there's usually just one name on the front cover, behind every book is an ensemble cast. And I'm delighted to say that the team behind *Feel-Good Productivity* has been utterly extraordinary.

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to be…' Amidst the craziness of everything going on in the business, your commitment to the project has kept its momentum up. And the book itself is immeasurably better for your having been involved with it.

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David Moldawer, your tough love at proposal stage was exactly what this project needed. Ripping apart the original proposal forced me to get crystal clear on the book's core message. A shout-out to my friend and fellow author Hasan Kubba as well, whose input in several brainstorming

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I also want to extend my deepest gratitude to the unsung champions of this venture: the tireless teams at both Cornerstone and Celadon. Firstly, a huge thank you to the Cornerstone team: Alice Dewing, Etty Eastwood, Sarah Ridley, Margarita Suntzeva, Anouska Levy, Rose Waddilove and Ebyan Egal, as well as everyone working behind the scenes.

Similarly, heartfelt appreciation to the Celadon team: Deb Futter, Rachel Chou, Jennifer Jackson, Jaime Noven, Anna Belle Hindenlang, Christine Mykityshyn, Liza Buell, Faith Tomlin, Erin Cahill, Anne Twomey and Rebecca Ritchey. Your relentless efforts have been instrumental in shaping *Feel-Good Productivity* into what it is today. Finally, thank you to Harry Haydon for the awesome cover.

And thank you to Alex Rayment and Lesley Wood, our incredible audio producers at ID Audio in London, for helping to put the audiobook together with such class and good humour.

I've realised over the years of writing this book that the literary world is a lovely, wholesome community, and *Feel-Good Productivity* has benefitted immensely from its extended family. A special nod to fellow writers, creators, entrepreneurs, and just remarkably friendly individuals like Matthew Dicks, Derek Sivers, Ryan Holiday, Cal Newport, James Clear, Mark Manson, Julie Smith, Tiago Forte, Noah Kagan, John Zeratsky, Lawrence Yeo, Charlie Houpert, Nicolas Cole, Scott Young, Nir Eyal, Anne-Laure Le Cunff, Pat Flynn, Khe Hy and August Bradley. Your collective wisdom, whether it came in the form of book outlines, manuscript reviews, marketing strategies, Zoom calls, or just some good old-fashioned encouragement, was invaluable. Thank you for seeing something in me, and for taking the time out from your own ridiculously busy schedules to help me out.

And then of course, we have my own team: the people who work with me day in and day out so that we can create inspiring, educational content that helps our readers, viewers and listeners build a life they love.

First up, Angus Parker, my general manager and the person I trust to keep the business on track. Angus, you've been an operational machine, keeping the gears of the business well-oiled while I hunker down in my proverbial cave to read and write. Without you managing our day-to-day operations, I wouldn't have had the headspace to fully commit to this project.

Bhav Sharma and Dan Anderton, both of whom have served as assistants at various junctures, thank you for bringing order to the chaos of my personal and work life. Your contributions have made this juggling act far more manageable.

And a heartfelt thank you to the rest of my dedicated team: Tintin, Becky, Amber, Gareth, Jakub, Alison, Adi, Saf, and all the incredible freelancers who help too. Without your collective hard work and creative ingenuity, we wouldn't have come close to making the impact that we have. Thanks also to Calum Worsley, Paul Tern, Sheen Gurrib, Ahmed Zadi, Pablo Simko, Elizabeth Filips and Corey Wilks; a sincere thank you to all of you, for your invaluable feedback in the early stages.

I can't overlook my emotional cornerstone throughout much of this journey, Izzy Sealey. Your consistent encouragement to write and steady emotional support were vital, as were your skills in being my brainstorm buddy during particularly tricky chapters. You were the voice of reason and motivation that often kept me on track.

A special nod to my brother Taimur Abdaal and sister-in-law Lucia Coulter, who endured my disorganisation and whirlwind energy, especially during that final year when we all lived together. Your patience was more than just familial duty; it was a life-saving grace as the book neared its completion.

But of course, none of this would have been possible without the love and support from my family. My grandmother Nani, who taught me the English language and infused me with a passion for learning, deserves a special mention. Your inspiration, love and endless encouragement have been pillars on which much of my life stands.

Last but certainly not least, my mother, Mimi: a single parent who uprooted her life multiple times to give Taimur and me an exceptional

education. Your sacrifices, work ethic and boundless love are the undercurrents of everything I do.

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION

Alice Isen used it as the basis for an influential experiment
Isen, A. M., Daubman, K. A. and Nowicki, G. P. (1987). Positive affect facilitates creative problem solving. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52*(6), 1122–1131.

Fredrickson proposed what she called the 'broaden-and-build' theory of positive emotions
For example, see Fredrickson, B. L. and Branigan, C. (2005). Positive emotions broaden the scope of attention and thought-action repertoires. *Cognition & Emotion, 19*(3), 313–332.

Positive emotions are bound up with a set of four hormones
See this blog post for a general outline of the four feel-good hormones: Sethi, C. and Anchal, S. (2021). Happy chemicals and how to hack them. https://classicfitnessgroup.com/blog/happy-chemicals-and-how-to-hack-them

decades of research showing that negative emotions cause the release of stress hormones
This study by Shelley Taylor was one of the first studies to show the biological effects of negative emotions. Taylor, S. E. (1991). Asymmetrical effects of positive and negative events: the mobilization-minimization hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin, 110*(1), 67–85.

In 2005, a team of psychologists read all the studies they could find on the complex relationship between happiness and success
Lyubomirsky, S., King, L. and Diener, E. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect: does happiness lead to success? *Psychological Bulletin, 131*(6), 803–855.

CHAPTER 1

everything about Professor Richard Feynman's career looked perfect
Story based on Feynman, R. P. (Vintage, 1992). *Surely You're Joking, Mr Feynman! Adventures of a Curious Character*.

Alexander Fleming, the scientist who discovered the antibiotic penicillin
Maurois, A. (Jonathan Cape, 1959). *The Life of Sir Alexander Fleming*.

Konstantin Novoselov, who shared the 2010 Nobel Prize in Physics
Andre Geim and Konstantin Novoselov, quoted in Bateson, P. and Martin, P. (Cambridge University Press, 2013). *Play, Playfulness, Creativity and Innovation*.

As one recent study put it

Petelczyc, C. A., Capezio, A., Wang, L., Restubog, S. L. D., and Aquino, K. (2018). Play at Work: An Integrative Review and Agenda for Future Research. *Journal of Management*, 44(1), 161–190.

In one 2020 experiment from New York University and the University of Miami
Heller, A. S., Shi, T. C., Ezie, C. E. C., Reneau, T. R., Baez, L. M., Gibbons, C. J. and Hartley, C. A. (2020). Association between real-world experiential diversity and positive affect relates to hippocampal–striatal functional connectivity. *Nature Neuroscience*, *23*(7), 800–804.

Dr Stuart Brown has spent most of his career studying the psychology of play
Brown, S. L. (Penguin, 2009). *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*.

we can start to take on a 'play personality' that frees up our sense of adventure
See www.nifplay.org/what-is-play/play-personalities/

They're three of the nineteen prompts used by researchers
Gruber, M. J., Gelman, B. D. and Ranganath, C. (2014). States of curiosity modulate hippocampus-dependent learning via the dopaminergic circuit. *Neuron, 84*(2), 486–496.

the writer Walter Isaacson summarised his findings thus
Isaacson, W. (2017). *Leonardo da Vinci*.

what lead scientist Jaak Panksepp called 'the biology of joy'
Zaborney, M. (20 April 2017). Jaak Panksepp: 1943–2017. *The Blade*. Available online: https://www.toledoblade.com/Deaths/2017/04/20/Jaak-Panksepp-1943-2017-BGSU-researcher-recognized-for-work-with-emotions-brain.html

the hormone is activated by 'sex, shopping, [and] smelling cookies baking in the oven'
See https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/dopamine-the-pathway-to-pleasure#:~:text=Dopamine%20can%20provide%20an%20intense,or%20a%20%22dopamine%20rush.%22

scientists from Columbia University took a group of rats at various different stages of development
Klein, Z. A., Padow, V. A. and Romeo, R. D. (2010). The effects of stress on play and home cage behaviors in adolescent male rats. *Developmental Psychobiology*, *52*(1), 62-70.

Children are more likely to play when they're in a comfortable
Tegano, D. W., Sawyers, J. K. and Moran, J. D. (1989). Problem-finding and solving in play: the teacher's role. *Childhood Education, 66*(2), 92–97.

And studies of adults in the workplace have found
Mukerjee, J. and Metiu, A. (2021). Play and psychological safety: an ethnography of innovative work. *Journal of Product Innovation Management, 39*(3), 394–418.

In 2016, a NASA-trained engineer
You can check out Mark's great TED Talk called 'The Super Mario Effect' at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCLJBTz9I6U

CHAPTER 2

Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph attempted to sell their fledgling company

Hastings, R. and Meyer, E. (Penguin, 2020). *No Rules Rules: Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention* and Randolph, M. (Endeavour, 2019). *That Will Never Work: The Birth of Netflix and the Amazing Life of an Idea*.

McCord summarised her focus on freedom and responsibility
McCord, P. (2018). *Powerful: Building a Culture of Freedom and Responsibility*.

This group of twenty-eight female students
Hu, L., Motl, R. W., McAuley, E. and Konopack, J. F. (2007). Effects of self-efficacy on physical activity enjoyment in college-aged women. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 14*(2), 92–96.

That influence was, in large part, down to an idea
Bandura, A. (1978). Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Advances in Behavior Research and Therapy, 1*(4), 139–161.

By 1998, psychologists Alexander Stajkovic and Fred Luthans were able to state
Stajkovic, A. D. and Luthans, F. (1998). Self-efficacy and work-related performance: a meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 124*(2), 240–261.

In 2014, scientists at Bangor University
Blanchfield, A. W., Hardy, J., De Morree, H. M., Staiano, W. and Marcora, S. M. (2014). Talking yourself out of exhaustion: the effects of self-talk on endurance performance. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise, 46*(5), 998–1007.

My favourite study showing how this works comes from the Clemson University Outdoor Lab
Harrison, M. B. and McGuire, F. A. (2008). An investigation of the influence of vicarious experience on perceived self-efficacy. *American Journal of Recreation Therapy, 7*(1), 10–16.

a catchy name for the way these learning experiences compound
Bandura, A., Adams, N. E. and Beyer, J. (1977). Cognitive processes mediating behavioral change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 35*(3), 25–139.

a study carried out by researchers at Stanford's School of Education in 2009
Chase, C. C., Chin, D. B., Oppezzo, M. A. and Schwartz, D. L. (2009). Teachable agents and the protégé effect: increasing the effort towards learning. *Journal of Science Education and Technology, 18*, 334–352.

The researchers named this phenomenon the 'protégé effect'
The protégé effect is also known as 'Learning by Teaching'. It was developed by Jean-Pol Martin in the 1980s. See Stollhans, S. Learning by teaching: developing transferable skills in Corradini, E., Borthwick, K. and Gallagher-Brett, A. (eds) (Research-publishing.net, 2016). *Employability for Languages*, 161–164.

older siblings on average have higher IQs and perform better in school
Kristensen, P. and Bjerkedal, T. (2007). Explaining the relation between birth order and intelligence. *Science, 316*(5832), 1717.

According to self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation is substantially more powerful than extrinsic motivation
Self-determination theory is a broad theory about what motivates human beings. It was developed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in their seminal work, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-*

Determination in Human Behavior, published in 1985.

comes from FiletOfFish1066
Leah Stephens (8 June 2016). Reddit user claims he automated his job for 6 years, finally is fired, forgets how to code. *Interesting Engineering*. Available online: http://interestingengineering.com/culture/programmer-automates-job-6-years-boss-fires-finds

a group of academics crafted an ingenious set of studies
Nanakdewa, K., Madan, S., Savani, K. and Markus, H. R. (2021). The salience of choice fuels independence: implications for self-perception, cognition, and behavior. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 118*(30), e2021727118.

CHAPTER 3

Scientists have long been aware of what they call 'relational energy'
See https://oxford-review.com/oxford-review-encyclopaedia-terms/relational-energy-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters-to-organisations/

In a study in 2003, psychology professors
Cross, R., Baker, W. and Parker A. (2003). What creates energy in organizations? *MIT Sloan Management Review, 44*(4), 51–56.

This is the suggestion of Stanford professors Gregory Walton and Priyanka Carr
Carr, P. B. and Walton, G. M. (2014). Cues of working together fuel intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 53*, 169–184.

In a 2017 paper, these academics brought together
Good, A., Choma, B. and Russo, F. A. (2017). Movement synchrony influences intergroup relations in a minimal groups paradigm. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 39*(4), 231–238.

It's an effect that Allan Luks understands better than anyone
Luks, A. and Payne, P. (iUniverse, 2001). *The Healing Power of Doing Good*.

Benjamin Franklin – the polymathic founding father of the United States
See https://www.ushistory.org/franklin/autobiography/page48.htm

people tend to underestimate the likelihood that other people will agree to help us by up to 50 per cent
Flynn, F. J. and Lake, V. K. B. (2008). If you need help, just ask: underestimating compliance with direct requests for help. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 95*(1), 128–143.

In a 2017 study, Bohns found
Roghanizad M. M. and Bohns V. K. (2017). Ask in person: you're less persuasive than you think over email. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 69*, 223–226.

characterises capitalisation as involving two components
Gable, S. L. and Reis, H. T. (2010). Good news! Capitalizing on positive events in an interpersonal context. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 42*, 195–257.

researchers videotaped seventy-nine couples who were dating
Gable, S. L., Gonzaga, G. C. and Strachman, A. (2006). Will you be there for me when things go right? Supportive responses to positive event disclosures. *Journal of Personality and Social*

Psychology, 91(5), 904–917.

60 per cent of people lie at least once in an average ten-minute conversation

Feldman, R. S., Forrest, J. A. and Happ, B. R. (2002). Self-presentation and verbal deception: do self-presenters lie more? *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 24*(2), 163–170.

the solution is not to be honest but *candid*

Scott, K. (St. Martin's Press, 2019). *Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity*.

CHAPTER 4

One of the strangest videos I've ever seen is called 'How bad do you want it?'

Check out the video here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsSC2vx7zFQ&t=14s&ab_channel=MattHowell

In the words of psychology professor Joseph Ferrari

Blaschka, A. (9 November 2022). You're not lazy; you're scared: how to finally stop procrastinating. *Forbes*. Available online: https://www.forbes.com/sites/amyblaschka/2021/04/03/youre-not-lazy-youre-scared-how-to-finally-stop-procrastinating/?sh=2753ed526dab

intolerance of uncertainty inventory

To see more on the intolerance of uncertainty inventory, see www.psychologytools.com/resource/intolerance-of-uncertainty/#:~:text=Intolerance%20of%20uncertainty%20involves%20the,about%20what%20will%20happen%20next

according to a review on the relationship between anxiety and uncertainty

Grupe, D. W. and Nitschke, J. B. (2013). Uncertainty and anticipation in anxiety: an integrated neurobiological and psychological perspective. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 14*, 488–501.

German officers embraced the concept of *Auftragstaktik*

For more on the concept of Auftragstaktik, see smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-germans-defined-auftragstaktik-what-mission-command-and-not

It was, in the words of the strategy writer Chad Storlie, 'a military disaster'

Storlie, C. (3 November 2010). Manage uncertainty with commander's intent. *Harvard Business Review*.

Studies have found that although specific, challenging goals

Höpfner, J. and Keith, N. (2021). Goal missed, self hit: goal-setting, goal-failure, and their affective, motivational, and behavioral consequences. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 704970.

In 2009, researchers at Harvard, Northwestern

Ordóñez, L. D., Schweitzer, M. E., Galinsky, A. D. and Bazerman, M. H. (2009). Goals gone wild: the systematic side effects of over-prescribing goal setting. *Academy of Management Perspectives, 23*(1), 6–16.

increases our ability to identify why things will go right

Klein, G. (2007). Performing a project premortem. *Harvard Business Review, 85*(9), 18–19.

Time is, in the words of the philosophy writer Oliver Burkeman

Burkeman, O. (Vintage, 2022). *Four Thousand Weeks*.

the most effective ways to get people to do more exercise
Robinson, S. A., Bisson, A. N., Hughes, M. L., Ebert, J. and Lachman, M. E. (2019). Time for change: using implementation intentions to promote physical activity in a randomised pilot trial. *Psychology & Health, 34*(2), 232–254.

these 'if … then…' prompts fundamentally alter people's long-term behaviour
Gollwitzer, P. M. and Sheeran, P. (2006). Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 38*, 69–119.

CHAPTER 5

They were participants in a ground-breaking study into the science of fear
Kircanski, K., Lieberman, M. D. and Craske, M. G. (2012). Feelings into words: contributions of language to exposure therapy. *Psychological Science, 23*(10), 1086–1091.

Becker called his insight 'labelling theory'
See more on labelling theory here: https://www.simplypsychology.org/labeling-theory.html

By the time Peter DeLeo arrived at the Ranch House Café in Olancha
See Peter DeLeo's story covered by the *LA Times* here: https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-12-10-me-7204-story.html

This is the question that survival psychologist John Leach has spent years trying to answer
See www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/survival-psychology-wont-live

The scientific name for this process is 'cognitive reappraisal'
McRae, K., Ciesielski, B. and Gross, J. J. (2012). Unpacking cognitive reappraisal: goals, tactics, and outcomes. *Emotion, 12*(2), 250–255.

'Sasha Fierce is the fun, more sensual, more aggressive, more outspoken side'
See www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/beyonc-create-alter-ego-sasha-27894824

Adele created her own alter ego, Sasha Carter
See adele.fandom.com/wiki/Sasha_Carter

an interesting phenomenon known as the 'spotlight effect'
The spotlight effect was introduced by social psychologists Thomas Gilovich, Victoria Husted Medvec and Kenneth Savitsky. They conducted a series of experiments in the late 1990s and early 2000s that investigated the extent to which individuals believe their actions or appearance are noticed and evaluated by others. In one such study they asked participants to wear a noticeable or potentially embarrassing T-shirt and then estimate how many people in a group noticed the shirt. The results consistently showed that participants greatly overestimated the number of observers. See Gilovich, T., Medvec, V. H. and Savitsky, K. (2000). The spotlight effect in social judgment: an egocentric bias in estimates of the salience of one's own actions and appearance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78*(2), 211–222.

The Batman effect was first identified by a team of researchers
White, R. E., Prager, E. O., Schaefer, C., Kross, E., Duckworth, A. L. and Carlson, S. M. (2017). The 'Batman Effect': improving perseverance in young children. *Child Development, 88*(5), 1563–1571.

CHAPTER 6

a researcher who led a Dutch study into the psychology of vegetable shopping
Huitink, M., Poelman, M. P., van den Eynde, E., Seidell, J. C. and Dijkstra, S. C. (2020). Social norm nudges in shopping trolleys to promote vegetable purchases: a quasi-experimental study in a supermarket in a deprived urban area in the Netherlands. *Appetite*, *151*, 104655.

when I listened to his candid interview with podcaster Tim Ferriss
Check out the transcript of Matt Mochary's interview with Tim Ferriss here: tim.blog/2023/03/03/matt- mochary-transcript/

Tim Pychyl knows procrastination better than anyone
I interviewed Dr Pychyl on my podcast *Deep Dive* in 2022. Check out the interview here: aliabdaal.com/podcast/tim-pychyl/

By 2003, Sanderson had written twelve novels
See a list of Brandon's work here: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brandon_Sanderson_bibliography

Sanderson tracks his word count and doesn't stop writing
Brandon Sanderson talks about his writing goals here: faq.brandonsanderson.com/knowledge-base/what-is-your- daily-wordcount-time-goal/

In 2016, researchers combined 138 studies
Harkin, B., Webb, T. L., Chang, B. P. I., Prestwich, A., Conner, M., Kellar, I., Benn, Y. and Sheeran, P. (2016). Does monitoring goal progress promote goal attainment? A meta-analysis of the experimental evidence. *Psychological Bulletin, 142*(2), 198–229.

In 2010, Carleton University psychologist Michael Wohl
Wohl, M. J. A., Pychyl, T. A. and Bennett, S. H. (2010). I forgive myself, now I can study: how self-forgiveness for procrastinating can reduce future procrastination. *Personality and Individual Differences, 48*(7), 803–808.

CHAPTER 7

the World Health Organization (WHO) had redefined burnout
See www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases

'People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on'
Watch Steve Jobs' speech here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8eP99neOVs&ab_channel=Erin%27Folletto%27Casali

either 'hell yeah' or 'no'
Learn more about Derek Sivers' book here: https://sive.rs/n

a method that comes from Juliet Funt
Funt, J. (Harper Business, 2021). *A Minute to Think: Reclaim Creativity, Conquer Busyness, and Do Your Best Work.*

a study undertaken by the computer scientists Rachel Adler and Raquel Benbunan-Fich
Adler, R. F. and Benbunan-Fich, R. (2012). Juggling on a high wire: multitasking effects on performance. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies, 70*(2), 156–168.

He only got a couple of hours a night with his wife and kids
Lengel, D. (March 31 2018). I've decided to reclaim my life – by using an old Nokia phone. *Guardian*. Available online: www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/mar/31/nokia-3310-t9-phone-smartphone-iphone-reclaim-life

one that the blogger Nate Soares calls 'failing with abandon'
Read more about Nate's concept of failing with abandon here: https://mindingourway.com/failing-with-abandon/

James Tyler and Kathleen Burns invited sixty undergraduate students
Tyler, J. M. and Burns, K. C. (2008). After depletion: the replenishment of the self's regulatory resources. *Self and Identity, 7*(3), 305–321.

requires some element of what psychologists call 'self-regulatory exertions'
Self-regulation refers to the process by which individuals manage their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours to achieve personal goals. It involves a wide range of skills such as controlling impulses, delaying gratification, managing emotional reactions and maintaining focus on tasks. See https://positivepsychology.com/self-regulation/

CHAPTER 8

the *OED* could not settle on just one word
Download the *OED* report here: languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2020/

According to a team of psychologists from San Francisco State and Illinois State universities
Eschleman, K. J., Madsen, J., Alarcon, G. and Barelka, A. (2014). Benefiting from creative activity: the positive relationships between creative activity, recovery experiences, and performance-related outcomes. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 87*(3), 579–598.

two groups of patients were recovering from gallbladder surgery
Ulrich, R. S. (1984). View through a window may influence recovery from surgery. *Science, 224*(4647), 420–421.

In one study, researchers gathered a group of 150 university students
Lee, K. E., Williams, K. J. H., Sargent, L. D., Williams, N. S. G. and Johnson, K. A. (2015). 40-second green roof views sustain attention: the role of micro-breaks in attention restoration. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 42*, 182–189.

One study published in 2018 had participants close their eyes
Sona, B., Dietl, E. and Steidle, A. (2019). Recovery in sensory-enriched break environments: integrating vision, sound and scent into simulated indoor and outdoor environments. *Ergonomics, 62*(4), 521–536.

psychologists from Sweden and the Netherlands
Johansson, M., Hartig, T. and Staats, H. (2011). Psychological benefits of walking: moderation by company and outdoor environment. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being, 3*(3), 261–280.

The DMN helps us to recall memories
For a pioneering study on the default mode network, see Raichle, M. E., MacLeod, A. M., Snyder, A. Z., Powers, W. J., Gusnard, D. A. and Shulman, G. L. (2001). A default mode of brain function. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 98*(2), 676–682.

CHAPTER 9

Sheldon recruited a group of people
Sheldon, K. M. (2020). Going the distance on the Pacific Crest Trail: the vital role of identified motivation. *Motivation Science*, *6*(2), 177–181.

relative autonomy continuum
Sheldon, K. M., Osin, E. N., Gordeeva, T. O., Suchkov, D. D. and Sychev, O. A. (2017). Evaluating the dimensionality of self-determination theory's relative autonomy continuum. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *43*(9), 1215–1238.

A group of researchers led by Professor Emily Lykins
Lykins, E. L. B., Segerstrom, S. C., Averill, A. J., Evans, D. R. and Kemeny, M. E. (2007). Goal shifts following reminders of mortality: reconciling posttraumatic growth and terror management theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *33*(8), 1088–1099.

'Leigh Penn, champion of at-risk youth, dies at 90'
This story comes from Leigh Penn's wonderful story, available here: medium.com/inspired-writer/the-most-powerful- writing-exercise-i-did-at-stanford-c59ba6a6fa93

Stanford Business School taking a famous course
Check out the description of this course here: https://law.stanford.edu/nl-course/lives-of-consequence-how-individuals-create-happy-meaningful-and-successful-lives/

Bill Burnett spent several years working at Apple
Burnett, B. and Evans, D. (Vintage Digital, 2016). *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life*.

In a paper published in the journal *Science*, a group of psychologists
Miyake, A., Kost-Smith, L. E., Finkelstein, N. D., Pollock, S. J., Cohen, G. L. and Ito, T. A. (2010). Reducing the gender achievement gap in college science: a classroom study of values affirmation. *Science*, *330*(6008), 1234–1237.

trawled through fifty-one studies made up of over 36,000 data points
Sutton, A. (2020). Living the good life: a meta-analysis of authenticity, well-being and engagement. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *153*, 109645.

researchers asked a group of seven-to-ten-year-olds who struggled with maths
Read more about this study here: https://www.entrepreneur.com/growing-a-business/the-science-behind-baby-steps-how-to-tackle-goals-big-and/245767

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Ali Abdaal is a doctor, entrepreneur, amateur magician, and the world's most-followed productivity expert. Ali became intrigued by the science of productivity while juggling the demands of medical training at the University of Cambridge with building his business. While working as a doctor in the UK's National Health Service, Ali started to document online his journey toward living a healthier, happier, more productive life. In the years since, Ali's evidence-based videos, podcasts, and articles about the human mind have reached hundreds of millions of people all around the world. In 2021, Ali took a break from his medical practice to focus full-time on his work popularizing the science of human flourishing and high performance. You can sign up for ebook updates here.

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